

The Affect of Fosterage in Medieval Ireland

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'I, Thomas Charles O'Donnell, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'

Abstract

In this thesis I will reconstruct the emotional community created by fosterage: mark out its boundaries; describe its construction; and show how the deep love expressed by poets and characters in the saga literature for their foster-family under-pinned medieval Irish society. As I recreate the emotional community of fosterage, we see that fosterage bonds are created outside the legal framework, through providing nutrition, education, and sharing experience. In order to fully understand medieval Irish fosterage, we need to understand fosterage for love as well as for a fee.

The emotional community of fosterage is recreated via a number of case studies, based on relationships within the foster family. The first chapter examines the foster father/fosterling relationship through the figure of Cú Chulainn and questions the received picture of multiple fosterage. The foster-mother relationship is the focus of the second chapter, in their role of mourning dead fosterlings and acting as guardian of memory. The third chapter asks the question who is a foster-sibling and examines the boundaries of the fosterage terminology. The language is particularly fluid in the *flanaigeacht* literature. The final chapters examine fosterage outside the foster family. Fosterage was employed as a metaphor in religious writings and chapter four analyses this metaphor to understand both the experience of the divine and the position of children in monasteries. Chapter five turns to fosterage between humans and animals, extended the metaphoric use of fosterage seen in earlier chapters. Looking at fosterage in this unusual setting makes the assumptions about the emotional ties it creates easier to address.

Fosterage bonds were created by nurturing, educating and sharing experience and lasted throughout the participants lives. In order to appreciate the impact fosterage had on medieval Irish society we must appreciate the affective bonds it created and the affective way it was created.

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Abbreviations

AnS	<i>Acallamh na Senórach</i> , ed. by Whitley Stokes, in <i>Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch</i> , ed. by Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch, 4 vols (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1900), IV, pp. 1-438
AFM	<i>Annala Rioghachta Éireann: Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters, from the earliest period to the year 1616</i> , ed. by John O'Donovan, 7 vols (Dublin: Hodges & Smith, 1848-51)
AU	<i>The Annals of Ulster</i> , ed. by W. M. Hennessey and B Mac Carthy (Dublin: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1893-1895)
BNE	<i>Bethada Náem nÉirenn: Lives of the Irish Saints</i> , ed. and trans. by Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922)
CCC	<i>Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories</i> , ed. by A. G. van Hamel (Dublin: DIAS, 1968)
CCH	<i>Collectio Canonum Hibernensis – Die irische Kanonsammlung</i> , ed. by Hermann Wasserschleben, 2 nd ed. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1885)
CIH	<i>Corpus Iuris Hibernici</i> , ed. by Daniel A. Binchy, 7 vols (Dublin: DIAS, 1978)
CMCS	Cambridge/Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies
CMM	<i>Cath Maige Mucrama: The battle of Mag Mucrama</i> , ed. and trans. by Máirín O'Daly, Irish Texts Society 50 (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1975)
Cogitosus	<i>Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur, vel a catholicis scriptoribus celebrantur</i> , ed. by Johannes Bollandus et al., 68 vols (Antwerp: Ioannes Meursius, 1658), III, pp. 135-141
eDIL	<i>Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language</i> <www.dil.ie> based on <i>Dictionary of the Irish Language</i> , ed. by E. G. Quin and others (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913-1976)
LU	Lebor na hUidre, Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25

FO	<i>Félire Óengusso Céli Dé: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee</i> , ed. and trans. by Whitley Stokes (London: Harrison and Sons, 1905)
FTB	Kuno Meyer, 'Feis Tige Becfholtaig', <i>ZCP</i> 5 (1905), pp. 500-504
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844-64)
PRIA	Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy
RC	Revue Celtique
TBC 1	<i>Táin Bó Cúalnge Recension 1</i> , ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: DIAS, 1976)
TBC LL	<i>Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster</i> , ed. and trans. by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin: DIAS, 1967)
TBDD	<i>Togail Bruidne Da Derga</i> , ed. by Eleanor Knott (Dublin: DIAS, 1936)
VSH	<i>Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae: Partim hactenus ineditae ad fidem codicum manuscriptorum recognovit prolegomenis notis indicibus instruxit</i> , ed. by Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910)
YBL	Yellow Book of Lecan, Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318
ZCP	Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie

0. Introduction

0.1. The Object of Study

The perils of fosterage are often described through the metaphor of the cuckoo. The medieval Irish were aware of the cuckoo and its unusual approach to raising its young. There was a strong thread of Classical learning running through Irish literary productions of the eleventh and twelfth century, as well as an awareness of natural historical writing. The cuckoo appears in the late Middle Irish text, *Tromdám Guaire*.¹ It is said of the cuckoo: ‘And others say that another bird fosters (*banaltramus*) it, called the *cobcan*. It puts its own chick away and feeds the chick of the cuckoo until it is big. Then the cuckoo takes the chick back and it has no more affection for the *cobcan* than for any other bird’.² The image of the cuckoo can be used to express society’s, usually negative, feelings about fosterage.³ It is overly onerous on the fosterers and leaves them with little reward. Even the word choice in the above quotation seems to point the semantic finger at the perils of fosterage.

Yet, the story of the cuckoo appears in a text not describing fosterage. Instead, the image of the cuckoo describes the overly arduous demands made on Guaire’s hospitality by the poets of Ireland. The image from this text is of excessive demands made by the poetic class, it is not an indictment of fosterage. In fact, fosterage is, more often than not, described as benefitting all those involved. It creates long-lasting, affectionate bonds between all member of the foster-family. It is a formative and

¹ I will be using the traditional dates for the periodisation of the Irish language, drawing most of my examples from the Middle Irish period. The traditional date ranges are Early Old Irish (mid-sixth century to the end of the seventh), Classical Old Irish (eighth and ninth centuries), Middle Irish (tenth to twelfth centuries). For more see Paul Russell, *An Introduction to Celtic Languages* (London, 1995).

² *Tromdámh Guaire*, ed. by Maud Joynt (Dublin, 1931), p. 6. For a discussion of problems dating this text, see James P. Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), p. 170.

³ Jennifer Neville, ‘Fostering the Cuckoo: “Exeter Book” Riddle 9’, *The Review of English Studies* 58 (2007), 431–46.

emotionally powerful period, that cements bonds that last throughout a lifetime. That is not to say it is perceived in a universally positive way. Like all emotional bonds, it is prey to variation. It is classed as one of the ‘three dark things’ in the Triads, which is glossed as the things with an uncertain outcome. The other two are ‘giving into keeping’ and ‘guaranteeing’.⁴ Furthermore, in *Tecosca Cormaic* it is said: ‘Everyone is tranquil until fosterage’.⁵ Yet these gnomic utterances are given the lie by narrative texts. The overwhelmingly positive view has led to the commonplace that fosterage creates close emotional ties. As Charles-Edwards says ‘fosterage belonged more to the emotional sphere, less to the material, than did natural parenthood’.⁶ Fosterage’s position in the emotional sphere is often assumed, but it has never been fully studied. Quite what it means for fosterage to be more emotionally constituted will be addressed in this thesis. I shall mark out its boundaries; describe its construction; and show how this deep love, expressed by poets and characters in the narrative literature, underpinned medieval Irish society.

This thesis will provide a reconstruction of the emotional community of fosterage as it appears in texts across the medieval period. The *long durée* of the eighth to the thirteenth centuries provides a rich range of sources and the chance to put these sources, which may treat fosterage only passingly, in dialogue with one another. From this study it emerges that fosterage was constituted in two ways, through nutrition and education. Nutrition is most often the breast of the foster-mother, offered to the children they foster. While educative fosterage can function alongside this nutritive model, it can also begin later in the child’s life, after it has been weaned. I shall show that both models, and the combination of the two, are the basis of long lasting emotional ties. I borrow from Rosenwein’s approach to the history of emotions, but in an altered fashion to take into account the different scope of my project and its primary

⁴ *The Triads of Ireland*, ed. by Kuno Meyer (London, 1906), pp. 32-3.

⁵ *The Instructions of King Cormac mac Airt*, ed. and trans. by Kuno Meyer (Dublin, 1909), p. 31.

⁶ Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), p. 81.

sources.⁷ One of the crucial aspects of this study will be exploring the boundaries of fosterage. We are aware of the emotional bond between foster-siblings, but who counts as a foster-sibling? Is the connection between a foster-mother and a fosterling, really greater than that between a foster-father and a fosterling? *Cáin Lánamna* would have us believe so, when it suggests the following Isidorean etymology for *muime*, foster-mother: ‘mo-uime, mo do-ní uime ina int aite’ “greater-concerning him” she does more concerning him than the foster-father’.⁸

To find the boundaries of the emotionally constituted foster-family, I will analyse how emotions were expressed between the members of the foster-family. The use of formulaic language points to deeply ingrained cultural expectations, which appear alongside displays of emotion which written so as to seem spontaneous. These emotions are displayed at critical points in the foster relationship, but also at times beyond the duration of fosterage, as specified in the laws. The language of fosterage used also changes throughout characters’ lifetimes. Defining the boundaries of fosterage highlights those examples of metaphoric use of the language of fosterage and how this language was used outside the foster-family. Attention to metaphors allows us to see the semantic range of fosterage, what frame of reference it occupied, and how embedded it was in society. This work sheds light back onto the foster-family, illuminating the terms and phrases used within that emotional community from a different angle.

My thesis will recreate the emotional community of fosterage as it is depicted in medieval Irish literature. Methodologically, I will be following Rosenwein and her notion of an emotional community as ‘groups – usually but not always social groups – that have their own particular values, modes of feeling and ways to express those feelings’.⁹ Yet my study will contrast with her work on the emotional communities of

⁷ Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London, 2006); *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁸ *Cáin Lánamna: An Old Irish Tract on Marriage and Divorce Law*, ed. by Charlene M. Eska (Leiden, 2010), pp. 96-7.

⁹ Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, p. 3.

Gaul in the Early Middle Ages, in terms of scale and source material. She is concerned with the communities in a region or city, communities that can overlap, but that are large social units.¹⁰ The base unit of my work is the foster-family and I will investigate how emotions are represented within this smaller community. The notion of representation of emotion further distances me from Rosenwein's approach. I examine how the emotions are presented in the literature to recreate the social expectations surrounding the practice. The families that form my base unit take the social expectations of fosterage present in the literature as a model for their own actions. As we have few first-hand accounts of feeling within the foster-family during the Middle Ages, the picture I will recreate is one taken from literary sources. The emotional community of fosterage that this depicts is at once descriptive of those emotions felt within the foster-family and prescriptive, affecting how those same emotions were expressed.

This work draws on several different sources to try to trace a larger sense of emotional expectations. When combined, they will provide us with an image of the emotional community of the foster-family; an image which each family, in their own way, mirrors or rejects. The literary picture will not allow us to see how individuals felt in foster relationships. Even if such a project were feasible at any point in time - and there is much to suggest that it is not - my sources would not permit it. The sources are not letters, manuals of good behaviour, or diaries, but narrative. The narratives are taken from many literary genres, and some examples include the first-person voice of the poet, but, by and large, they are third person representations. These texts are not concerned with psychological realism but with the deeds of heroes and kings. Yet these heroes and kings are placed within a relatable setting and among a series of social ties that would have had resonance with a contemporary audience. The emotions presented in these texts would also form the lens through which contemporaries would understand and formulate their own feelings. The emotional community I shall present is one that exists as a cultural expectation more than a social reality.

¹⁰ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, p. 57.

The picture I wish to paint in this thesis is based on the social logic of the text, the background on which implausible heroes do unbelievable things. Behind these actions is the family in which the heroes live. This approach takes its cue from Spiegel's work on the social logic of the text. If we can never access the historical reality behind the texts, we can be aware of the way that reality affected the creation of the texts and was, in turn, affected by them: 'In that sense, texts both mirror *and* generate social realities, are constituted by *and* constitute the social and discursive formations which they may sustain, resist, contest, or seek to transform, depending on the case at hand'.¹¹ By examining the interactions of the foster-family, we will see the types of emotion, how, and by whom they were expected to be expressed. The first three chapters of the thesis address the different relationships in the foster-family. The first chapter looks at the relationship of foster-fathers to fosterlings; the second concentrates on foster-mothers mourning their dead fosterlings; and the third defines who can be called a foster-sibling.

This study seeks to flesh out the bones of fosterage found in the law tracts and closely examine the subtleties of the relationships. Once this is done, the idea of fosterage as presented in the literature of medieval Ireland can be extended to examples of fosterage that are not fosterage by law. An appreciation of the emotional, nutritive, and educative way in which fosterage bonds were created allows us to broaden the definition of fosterage. I investigate, in the final two chapters, how fosterage language was used metaphorically, how the emotional community was transposed onto other situations. Within the religious setting the fosterage metaphor is used to describe religious relationships to Christ. This metaphor was based on the ways in which young children in the monastery or within the religious family were framed and understood. The final chapter takes the metaphor outside the human family and examines how fosterage characterised human/animal relationships. The boundary between human and animal was a shifting one in this period but fosterage was seen as a clear marker of

¹¹ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 59-86: p. 77.

humanity. What is noticeable by its absence is the negative image of the cuckoo, with which I began. Fosterage is a positive marker of humanity, a social act done for the good, not an example of exploitation.

The emotional community of fosterage in medieval Ireland, has not been reconstructed before. Ó hInnse looked at 'Fosterage in Early and Medieval Ireland' in his 1943 PhD thesis, but this overview suffers from the deficiencies of age.¹² Since then there have been many studies of individuals or texts which have taken a nuanced view of fosterage relationships, but these are always taken in isolation.¹³ Assertions have been made about the nature of the bond, but the evidence has not been compiled in one place and put under close scrutiny, with the exception of Boll's 2003 thesis.¹⁴ Previous work has mentioned the emotional bonds of fosterage in passing and concentrated on the picture that can be gained by studying the law texts.¹⁵ However, there are two types of fosterage outlined in the law texts, *altram íarraith*, the fosterage of a fee, and *altram serce*, fosterage of love. The law texts concentrate on the exchange of goods in *altram íarraith* and have little to say about *altram serce*. My study shows how the emotional community of fosterage underlies social connections and medieval Irish ideas of social cohesion. These larger conclusions come out of a dossier of case studies and close readings. In-depth studies allow us to speak with some measure of certainty about the emotional connections created by fosterage. In some cases my study proves what we had previously only assumed. At others, I provide new readings and interpretations of texts, as our understanding of them is altered when read through the lens of fosterage. The foster-family is a complex web of ties, both emotional and legal, that define the very basic shape of human interaction in the period. If 'sibling studies

¹² Seamus Ó hInnse, 'Fosterage in Early and Medieval Ireland' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College Dublin, 1943).

¹³ Fosterage is central theme in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* as examined by Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga* (Oxford, 2013) and its role in Cú Chulainn's life is studied in Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish saga Táin Bó Cúailgne* (Toronto, 2006).

¹⁴ Sheila Boll, 'Fosterkin in Conflict: Fosterage as Character Motivation in Medieval Irish Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2003).

¹⁵ Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 115-17.

are the poor neglected stepchild of the history of the Western family', then the study of fictive kin is even more neglected.¹⁶ This is surprising given the fact that foster-kin bonds are threads that run throughout almost all medieval Irish literature. Investigating this bond, as it appears in a variety of texts, will place us in a firmer position to analyse the role of fosterage within other texts, without having to rely on assumptions of secondary literature.

0.2. Emotional Communities

This thesis is an attempt to access how people expected fosterage to work on an interpersonal level. It asks a variety of questions: what were the emotions that the institution elicited from those who participated in it, and what were the unwritten expectations that surrounded words like *oide*, *muime* and *dalta* – foster-father, foster-mother, and fosterling.¹⁷ The principal difficulty in writing such a history of emotions comes from the sources available. I will be relying on narrative sources rather than the first-hand letters, diaries, or even charters, that other studies of emotions in history rely on. However, I will argue that narrative literature has a normative effect in creating the emotional expectations around fosterage; this prescriptive role of the literature is analysed alongside its descriptive role in reflecting social convention. In this section I will lay out my methodological approach to these two aspects of the emotional community of fosterage, as seen in medieval Irish literature.

The growth of the history of emotions in the Middle Ages is, by now, not a new phenomenon. Since the field emerged in the 1980s, many commentators have taken to extending the history of emotions into the medieval period. Rosenwein and Hanawalt have both written about the need for a history of emotions and the various

¹⁶ Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (York, 2015), p. 1.

¹⁷ I will go into more detail on the vocabulary that surrounds fosterage in the section on the legal definitions of the relationship.

methodological approach to these histories.¹⁸ Rosenwein has called the study of ‘emotional communities’ a useful guide to creating a history of emotions. I will use an adapted version of her approach to emotional communities in my study of fosterage. Emotional communities often cover the same area as social communities; groups of people linked by shared lifestyles will share emotional ranges.¹⁹ In examining fosterage, and the communities that it creates, I am narrowing the focus and creating smaller circles of emotions, to borrow Rosenwein’s image. Yet each of these smaller circles, these fictive family units, would structure their emotional responses and actions on a socially-expected model of fosterage. Each small circle will partake in a much larger circle: the normative expectations of the emotions felt within a foster-family.

In this sense it may be worth briefly considering the wider concerns in the history of emotions: are emotions fixed in the genetic make-up of humanity and thus will not significantly differ throughout time, or are they purely social constructs, each emotion a unique product of a unique time and place? The Stearns have suggested that historians study ‘emotionology’, that is the collective emotional standards of society rather than the felt emotions. Their approach is useful, even if the terminology is clunky.²⁰ When discussing how foster-families enacted the roles that were depicted as normative in the narrative literature, I think Reddy’s notion of ‘emotives’ is a useful one.²¹ Reddy’s view is that emotions are neither relative nor universal, but that a universal emotional state is expressed, and therefore altered by, a socially constructed vocabulary. These expressions are called ‘emotives’, utterances that are not ‘performative’ – as they are not self-referential, and do not, of themselves, alter the world – but that are neither ‘descriptive’ – they do not passively describe an already constituted state of affairs. In the same way, literary depictions of fosterage inhabit the

¹⁸ Barbara H. Rosenwein, ‘Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions’, *Passions in Context* 1 (2010), 1-32; Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986).

¹⁹ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, pp. 24-5.

²⁰ Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, ‘Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards’, *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 813-36: p. 813.

²¹ William N. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001), p.104.

middle ground between representation and performance.

The literature allows us to see the filter through which such inaccessible emotions were passed, by examining the socially constructed expectations of the foster-family's emotions. Reddy based his view on first-person statements, something I have little access to in my sources. However, his argument that emotions are coloured by the tools a society has to describe them, is useful for my reconstruction of the emotional community of fosterage. While we can never recreate the emotions that were felt within foster bonds in medieval Ireland, we can reconstruct the language and expectations that would have been used to understand foster relationships. In this sense, when studying emotional communities, I seek to uncover 'the emotions that [the communities] value, devalue, or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore'.²² This thesis will reconstruct the emotional community that existed around fosterage in medieval Ireland. It was against these assumptions, expectations, and tropes of behaviour that the emotional lives of fosterers in this period, inaccessible in our sources, played out.

The slightly altered definition of emotional community that I propose, arises as a response to the difficulties of my sources. The new definition is also central to my methodological approach. The methodology takes as its starting point the assumption that fosterage was widespread in society. Fosterage appears in many sources emerging from medieval Ireland.²³ The proliferation implies that fosterage was commonplace, so to build up as accurate a picture as possible, I will study a wide variety of literary sources, some of which are not commonly used in the history of emotions. Where other studies of emotions in history would turn to letters, diaries, manuals of advice on how to behave and other sources which directly purport to represent the emotional expression or the emotional state of an individual, this study cannot. Towards the end

²² Rosenwein, 'Problems and Methods', p. 11.

²³ This thesis addresses a wide chronological and generic range of sources. Beyond the scope of the thesis I draw readers' attention to Boll's excellent thesis (Boll, 'Fosterkin in Conflict') and Charles-Edwards' comments (*Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 78).

of the period under investigation there are some bardic poems, which have a first-person singular voice.²⁴ Yet even here the conventions of the genre and the public nature of poetry prohibit a reading for insight into the mind of the author. My main sources are third-person heroic narratives, sagas, or saints' lives. Not only that but these narratives were produced in a culture in which psychological realism is often seen as absent and in which action is much preferred over thought. The sources would appear very poor ones to use for an emotional history. I argue that they can be used, with care, because of the commonplace nature of fosterage.

As noted above fosterage is an important feature of many narratives. It forms the emotional heart of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*;²⁵ it structures the relationships in *Fingal Rónáin*;²⁶ it begins the lives of Cormac mac Airt and many saints like Ailbe and Moling.²⁷ But fosterage is rarely the focus of the story. Rather, it forms part of the background, as one of the commonplaces used to will a suspension of disbelief in the action of the tale. Fosterage is so central to societal organisation that it takes the same place as sibling relationships, eating and sleeping – as a plausible background over which the heroes live. In this sense, fosterage and other elements of societal set-dressing, could be said to be social equivalents of oratorical tropes. Curtius said of these oratorical tropes: 'every oration (including panegyric) must make some propositions or thing plausible. It must adduce in its favour arguments which address themselves to the hearer's mind or heart. Now there is a whole series of such arguments which can be used on the most diverse occasions'.²⁸ If rhetorical tropes are used to make an argument plausible, the material tropes, the societal commonplaces, can be used to make a narrative plausible. The commonplaces, or social logic, come from addressing

²⁴ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe*, ed. by Nicholas J. A. Williams, (Dublin, 1980).

²⁵ Doris Edel, *Inside the Táin: Exploring Cú Chulainn, Fergus, Ailill, and Medb* (Berlin, 2015), p. 101

²⁶ Sheila Boll, 'Seduction, vengeance and frustration in Fingal Rónáin: the role of foster-kin in structuring the narrative', *CMCS* 47 (2004), 17-40.

²⁷ Vernam E. Hull, 'Geneamuin Chormac', *Ériu* 16 (1952), 79-85; VSH, I, pp. 46-64; *The Birth and Life of St Moling: Edited from a manuscript in the Royal Library, Brussels*, ed. and trans. Whitely Stokes (London, 1907).

²⁸ Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by W.R. Trask, (New York, 1953), p. 70.

the hearer's mind and heart, presenting an emotional world and series of relationships with which he or she would have been familiar to better convey the narrative point or points, whatever they may be. By examining the different versions of this background, some mere asides, others more fully articulated complex relationships, I will be able to piece together a picture of the emotions and attitudes associated with fosterage. This will necessitate a close reading of the texts, a reading which seeks to identify what assumptions the texts make about fosterage.

That is not to say any one narrative will, in itself, provide an accurate portrayal of fosterage. Rather, since it is a commonplace in the literature, multiple samples need to be examined to produce a full picture. Drawing multiple samples from multiple genres also minimises the potential distortion that would arise from generic convention. For example, it is well established that saints' lives were used to promote the political ambitions of the saint's current *familia*.²⁹ Such power plays are often worked out through interpersonal relationships and notions of subservience and debt can be portrayed in foster relationships.³⁰ Placing these tales alongside other descriptions of fosterage from sagas and elsewhere, will highlight commonalities and reduce the effect of anomalous portrayals. Such work will also avoid the pitfalls that some secondary literature can find when concentrating on one genre of source. For example, the oft stated age of seven for the beginning of fosterage is a product of an over-reliance on hagiographic sources.³¹ By collapsing the generic boundaries, I hope that the picture of fosterage that emerges will be more complete.³²

The final point I wish to address, is how the sources have been chosen.

²⁹ Charles-Edwards defines *familia* as 'The *familia* of a saint embraced the people belonging to his principal church, dependent churches and also dependent kindreds, while allies were perceived as independent *familiae*', *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 123.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Peter Parkes, 'Celtic Fosterage: Adoptive Kinship and Clientage in Northwest Europe' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48 (2006), 359-95: p. 370, for a theory on the different ecclesiastical and lay versions of fosterage. Seven as the age of fosterage is quoted in Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 116.

³² For comments on genre in medieval Irish literature see Erich Poppe, 'Reconstructing Medieval Irish Literary Theory: The lesson of *Airec Menman Uraird mac Coise*', *CMCS* 37 (1999), 33-54; Ralph O'Connor, 'Irish Narrative Literature and the Classical Tradition, 900-1300' in *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative*, ed. by Ralph O'Connor, (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 1-22.

Appendix 2 collects précis of many of the Irish sources used. As well as gathering together the main texts studied, I hope it will prove a useful reference for those who are less familiar with the medieval Irish canon. The ideal choice would be to examine all the texts of the medieval canon that are available to us. However, restrictions of time and space mean that selections must be made. I have not, to any great extent, analysed those texts in which fosterage does not appear. While this mirrors the nature of the sources, it would be wrong to say that fosterage *always* appears in medieval Irish narratives. The silences are important, as they can show when fosterage is not relevant, when it is not needed as a constant background presence. Furthermore, given the intertextual nature of Irish literary culture, there are some tales in which the absence of fosterage comes as a surprise. I have tried to include some in those instances when they directly reflect on the main sources used in this study. For example, when Conall Cernach is not described as Cú Chulainn's foster-brother in *Fled Bricrenn*, it could have ramifications for how their relationship is perceived in that text.³³ However I have not chosen to make them central case studies.

I examine texts from all the main cycles of medieval Irish literature to create a comprehensive view of the entire corpus. The system of classification represented by the cycles is, of course, a modern structural imposition.³⁴ Yet it affords the researcher a representative spread of the saga literature across the centuries. Where the Ulster Cycle represents a continuity with the past, the twelfth century saw the rise of the *ffianaigeacht* or Fenian Cycle. Comparisons between Finn and Cú Chulainn, the main heroes of the Fenian Cycle and Ulster Cycle respectively, are not new, but in terms of fosterage the two heroes present an interesting dichotomy. As the younger hero, tied to the tribe, Cú Chulainn demonstrates, in his own unique way some of the assumptions surrounding fosterage at an early age. Finn and his companions, on the other hand, represent a later stage in life, one in which fosterage should have been

³³ *Fled Bricrend*, ed. by George Henderson, (Dublin, 1899). Reading the silences forms part of the methodology laid out by Rosenwein. I have tried to incorporate those silences where possible.

³⁴ Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism* (Cambridge, 2008).

completed, yet the texts still show fosterage playing an important role in the life of these youths and fosterage bonds were still being created at this stage.

Elsewhere selections have been made from the Cycle of Kings and the Mythological Cycle. *Cath Maige Mucrama* is the most cited tale from the Kings' Cycle, as fosterage plays a key role in the action of the tale. Furthermore, the characters in this tale also appear in one of the instructive legal texts on fosterage, *Immathchor Aillela 7 Airt*.³⁵ Similarly the familial relationships described in the Mythological Cycle sometimes centre on fosterage. Bardic poetry sheds a new light on how these fosterage bonds should be expressed. As for the religious material, selections have been made from the many Irish and Latin saints' lives, as well as penitentials and martyrologies.

There is not the time or space to fully engage with debates on the intended audience and reception of medieval Irish literature. However, some comment must be made about the context in which these works were produced and so how the social reality of fosterage can be assessed. The first thing to note is that these texts were initially produced in a monastic setting;³⁶ they address the concerns of the elite more than the common man;³⁷ and there is a problem in transmission: 'almost always early Irish Latin texts survived only if they were taken to Carolingian Europe, while vernacular texts survived if they continued to be copied into the central and later Middle Ages'.³⁸ With these concerns as background, is there any basis for drawing social or anthropological conclusions from this literary analysis? The emotional history of fosterage can only be accessed via these texts. They only present us with a version of the emotions enacted and expected within the foster family. The picture that this thesis creates will be a synthetic one; we cannot know how closely the picture that emerges from the literature mirrors that in society. But if we approach these literary conclusions with care, they give us the closest picture of what might be expected to be

³⁵ Johan Corthals, 'Affiliation of Children: *Immathchor nAillela 7 Airt*', *Peritia* 9 (1995), 92-124.

³⁶ Eoin Mac Neill, 'Beginnings of Latin Culture in Ireland', *Studies* 20 (1931), 39-48, 449-60.

³⁷ Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 131-156.

³⁸ Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Context and Uses of Literacy in Early Christian Ireland', in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. by H. Pryce (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 62-82: p. 62.

felt among the foster-family, what emotions were plausible for these literary characters to display. The texts have been selected to recreate, when taken together, the emotional community of fosterage, but it must always be remembered that this is a picture of the elite community of fosterage and a picture that must be handled with due caution.

0.3. The Language of Fosterage

The medieval Irish had an extensive vocabulary to describe the act of fostering and the different people who might be involved in fosterage. In this section I will outline that vocabulary as it will be central to our understanding of how the emotional community of fosterage was conceptualised and communicated in our texts. The texts that I will be discussing were written across a long temporal range. It is interesting to note that the language of fosterage does not demonstrate a uniform shift over time, a constancy that mirrors the longevity of fosterage within the Gaelic world. Rather shifts in emphasis and use of the terminology comes on a text by text basis, so while this introduction outlines the basics of the vocabulary, this should not be seen as universal and definitive.

The verb associated with fosterage is *ailid*, the verbal noun of which, *altram*, is used of fosterage.³⁹ The *alt-* root can be seen in many of the other words associated with fosterage. As well as fostering the verb has a sense of rearing, as it is used of animals, and nourishing. The semantic indeterminacy between fostering, nourishing, and rearing is a recurrent feature in this research, highlighting the fact that while the vocabulary allows us to see broad trends, each text must be interrogated closely on its own merits. The foster family itself is made up of the *aite*, foster-father and *muime*, foster-mother.⁴⁰ *Aite* can also refer to a tutor or teacher and the overlap between foster

³⁹ eDIL, s.v., 1 *ailid*

⁴⁰ eDIL s.v. 1 *aite*; eDIL, s.v., *muim(m)e*.

terminology and educational terminology can be seen in Modern Irish.⁴¹ The fosterling is a *dalta*.⁴² The fosterling may have foster-siblings, which are *comalta*.⁴³ In the following section, I will analyse these terms more closely.

It is an old saw that the most common words for ‘foster-father’ and ‘foster-mother’, *aite* and *muime*, are hypocoristic terms.⁴⁴ That is to say, these are the ‘daddy’ and ‘mummy’ types of words, whereas *máthair* and *áthair* are the more formal words used for ‘mother’ and ‘father’. These are not the only terms for foster-father and mother used, but the other forms still use the hypocoristic phrasing, adding diminutives: *datán* for foster-father and *datnat* for foster-mother. The traditional reading is that these hypocorisms suggest that affectionate relationships were readily established between foster-parents and fosterlings at a young age, in preference to those formed between natural parents and their children. There is much to reinforce this view in our sources, even evidence of other hypocoristic naming conventions existing between foster-parents and fosterlings. For example, Cú Chulainn refers to Fergus as *popa* throughout the *Táin* and Mochóemóc has his name explained as a hypocoristic version of his name, given by his foster-mother: ‘Set hoc nomen evertit ipsa sancta Dei, vocans eum per dilectionem nomine quomodo vulgo nominatur, id est Mocoemhóg, quod latine dicitur: Meus pulcer [sic] iuvenis’.⁴⁵ The Latin reflections of these terms, *nutritor* and *nutrix*, appear to cover the same semantic ground in Latin saints’ lives.

Dalta, the term for ‘fosterling’ and *comalta*, the term for ‘foster sibling’, both have their root in *altram*, the term for fosterage itself. *Altram*, at base, carries connotations of feeding and nurturing, just like the Latin reflections of these terms, *alumnus* for example, does.⁴⁶ However *dalta* and *comalta* are not merely concerned

⁴¹ *Dalta* commonly means pupil in Modern Irish. *Foclóir Gaeilge-Bearla*, ed. by Niall Ó Dónaill (Dublin, 1977), p. 366.

⁴² eDIL, s.v. *daltae*.

⁴³ eDIL, s.v. *comalta*.

⁴⁴ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 86-87; Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 81; Paul Russell, ‘Patterns of Hypocorism in Early Irish Hagiography’ in *Saints and Scholars: Studies in Irish Hagiography*, ed. J. Carey, M. Herbert and P. Ó Riain (Dublin, 2001), pp. 237-49.

⁴⁵ VSH, II, pp. 166-67; see also, the note on Maedóc in FO, p. 169.

⁴⁶ Jan Bremmer, ‘Avunculate and Fosterage’, *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 4 (1976), 65-78: p. 73.

with feeding, but education and other fosterage concerns. ‘Fosterling’ is most frequently rendered as *dalta* in the laws of fosterage, but other terms were also used to refer to them. *Gormac*, literally ‘warm-son’, is a term often used to describe the sister’s son, and by extension the fosterling or adopted child, since the two definitions often overlapped.⁴⁷ We can see this in the way Bres is referred to in *Cath Maige Tuired* and Jaski has discussed the difference between the terms in relation to Cú Chulainn.⁴⁸ The differences between *gormac* and *dalta* will be addressed in chapter one, taking the figure of Cú Chulainn as a case study. *Dalta* can also accrete prefixes, so there are examples of *bronndaltae*, literally ‘breast-fosterling’, is used as a term of endearment.⁴⁹ *Dalta* is also the typical Irish rendering of *alumnus*.⁵⁰ This is instructive as the term *dalta* is also used for pupils within a more formally educational, rather than strictly fosterage context. Of course, as we shall see below, education is of central importance in the fosterage bond. This has led to some blurring of the line between pupil, nursling, and fosterling.

Similar shifting terminology is found among foster-siblings. These are not differentiated by gender, as *comalta* can refer to either a foster-sister or brother, although the evidence from the narrative sources, as we shall see, rather favours foster-brothers. Once again it can attract prefixes as Cú Chulainn refers to his loyal foster-brother as a *derbchomalta*, a ‘true-fosterbrother’, basing the use of *derb-* on the way

⁴⁷ For the relationship of *gor* to ‘warm’, see Rudolf Thurneysen, ‘Gubretha Caratniad’, *ZCP* 15 (1925), 312-13; Daniel A. Binchy, ‘Some Celtic Legal Terms’, *Celtica* 3 (1956), 221-31; Warren Cowgill, ‘The Etymology of Irish *Guidid* and the Outcome of **g^wh* in Celtic’, in *Lautgeschichte und Etymologie*, ed. by Mayhofer and others (Wiesbaden, 1980), pp. 49-78: p. 55. This view has been challenged by Schrijver who would see *gor*, *goire* connected with ‘worth, return value, counter value’ (Peter Schrijver, ‘OIr. *Gor* “pious, dutiful”: Meaning and Etymology’, *Ériu* 47 (1996), 193-204). This complicates an attempt to join Irish ideas around the *gormac* to ones expressed in Latin by *fovere* ‘warm, foster’.

⁴⁸ *Cath Maige Tuired: The second battle of Mag Tuired*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Gray (Dublin, 1982); Bart Jaski, ‘Cú Chulainn, *gormac* and *dalta* of the Ulstermen’, *CMCS* 37 (1999), 1-31.

⁴⁹ This term is commonly used of John the Baptist’s relationship with Christ. *The Passions and the Homilies from Leabhar Breac*, ed. by Robert Atkinson (Dublin, 1887), pp. 81, 227.

⁵⁰ The association between the Irish *alt-* root and the Latin *alo* is made explicit in *Sanas Chormaic* which glosses *altram* as follows: ‘altram .i. e ab eo quod est alo .i. ón bréthir is alo ailim ata’ ‘*altram* which is from *alo*, so the word *alo* is *ailim*’. ‘Sanas Cormaic: An Old Irish Glossary’, ed. by Kuno Meyer in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* ed. by Osborn Bergin and others, 5 vols (Halle, 1907-13), IV (1912), pp. 1-128: p. 1.

it is added to ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ to demonstrate blood-ties.⁵¹ There has been a suggestion, by Ní Dhonnchadha, that the term for handmaid, *inailt*, preserves the term for foster-sister.⁵² This terminological shifting is central to the development of *Fingal Rónáin*.⁵³ It is illuminating that by the period I am concerned with, the sense of this word had shaded into that of servant. The identification of servant and fosterling is seen in some naming conventions that will be discussed later.

In this section I have outlined some of the common vocabulary associated with fosterage and some of the common difficulties found when using this vocabulary. These terms will reoccur throughout the thesis and in each case their semantic force will be evaluated. While in the modern language some of these terms have come to represent educational bonds, in the pre-modern period their meaning was always moving between the educative and nutritive, the two main responsibilities of, and means of forging, foster relationships. Each use will be examined on its own terms which, when brought together in this thesis, will allow us to see the full range of meaning that underpinned fosterage bonds.

0.4. The Legal Definition of Fosterage.

Fosterage was regulated by the laws, as was almost every aspect of medieval Irish life. Previously fosterage has been analysed from this legal angle, since the law texts lay out the rights and responsibilities of all involved. The corpus is large with the modern edition of the vernacular laws running to six volumes. The primary texts were written down between 650 and 750, yet they attracted a range of commentaries and glosses that date from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries.⁵⁴ The laws are also literary

⁵¹ eDIL s.v. *derbchomalta*. For more discussion of Cú Chulainn’s use of the phrase see § 3.2 of this thesis.

⁵² Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Inailt ‘foster-sister, fosterling’, *Celtica* 18 (1986), 185-191.

⁵³ *Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories*, ed. by David Greene (Dublin, 1955), pp. 1-15.

⁵⁴ Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, ‘Early Irish Law’, *A New History of Ireland*, ed. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, 9 vols (Oxford, 2005-11), I (2005), pp. 331-70: p. 331; Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 2005).

products which interacted with contemporary oral practice and culture. Accessing a definitive picture of fosterage from such source materials is a challenge. Yet they do provide us with a picture of how some members of that society viewed the fosterage system. Although fragmentary, *Cáin Íarraith* is a legal tract specifically addressing child-rearing and fosterage. Beyond this, fosterage occurs in some other legal tracts, which allows us to reconstruct some of the assumptions around the practice. While this may appear to create a clear picture of fosterage, it is worth recalling the difficulty in using the evidence from law to point to social reality.⁵⁵ The disjuncture is particularly striking in the case of fosterage as legal texts concentrate on one form of the practice to the detriment of the other: 'The laws distinguish two types of fosterage. One is fosterage for affection (*altram serce*) for which no fee is paid. The other type of fosterage is for a fee and is dealt with in the law-text *Cáin Íarraith* 'the law of fosterage-fee'.⁵⁶ *Íarraith* is the word for fosterage fee, whereas *serc* means love, in both its sacred and profane guises. That the focus of the law is on fee rather than affection is not surprising. As Stacey has shown with regard to contracts: 'Long-term relationships like clientship, fosterage, and tutoring were generally not undertaken by the elaborate mechanisms and guarantors characteristic of the formal oral contract'.⁵⁷ Fosterage does appear in legal texts but most of its practice falls outside those constraints.

Alongside the fees, the legal sources indicate that there were some obligations attendant on fosterage. Legal responsibility over the child was transferred to the foster-father. The foster-father was entitled to a third of his fosterling's honour-price if he was killed, a right which extended throughout the fosterling's life.⁵⁸ In the same way, the foster-father was held responsible for any misdemeanours committed by the

⁵⁵ Daniel A. Binchy, 'The Linguistic and Historical View of the Irish Law Tracts', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 29 (1943), 3-35; Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988), pp. 225-63; Nora Patterson, 'Brehon Law in Late Medieval Ireland "Antiquarian and Obsolete" or "Traditional and Functional"?', *CMCS* 17 (1989), 43-63; Neil McLeod, 'The Concept of Law in Ancient Irish Jurisprudence', *The Irish Jurist* 17 (1989), 356-67; Thomas M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Medieval Gaelic Lawyer* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁵⁶ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 87.

⁵⁷ Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland* (Philadelphia, 2007), p. 118.

⁵⁸ CIH 440.9-10.

fosterling while under his care and so had to pay fines incurred.⁵⁹ The power relationship is aptly illustrated in *Berrad Airechta*, in which three types of son of a living father are mentioned: the cold son, the warm son, and the fostered son.⁶⁰ This last was free from his father's authority because that authority had been passed onto another.⁶¹ The final transfer of funds came at the end of fosterage, when the foster-family would leave the child with a parting gift, the *sét gertha*, 'valuable of affection'.⁶² Within the fees exchange we can see affection and warm feeling, even if this emotion has been formalised.⁶³ Emotions play a central role in fosterage, forming another type of fosterage, distinct from contractual obligation. In order to understand fosterage, especially to understand 'fosterage of affection', we need to understand the emotions at work within foster relationships.

The law texts lay out the responsibilities the foster-parents had to their charges. The most basic of these were for food and clothing. Medieval Ireland was a hierarchically bound society and the keen awareness of social status extended to children, as much as it did to adults. The laws describe in detail what clothes are appropriate for the children of different social grades to wear, as well as what food they should be given.⁶⁴ This awareness of social standing also extended to the skills each fosterling was expected to learn while they remained with their foster-family. The sons of kings and nobles were taught board games, horsemanship, swimming and marksmanship, while the son of an *ócaire*, the lowest grade of freeman, learnt more pedestrian tasks, such as animal husbandry, how to chop firewood, dry corn, and comb wool. The skills taught to girls were still determined by class, although these too were

⁵⁹ CIH 440.8.

⁶⁰ The cold son (*mac úar*) had not provided filial service to his father and so cannot make contracts. The warm son (*mac té*) displayed proper filial piety and so can make contracts with his father's consent. Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 80.

⁶¹ Robin Chapman Stacey, 'Translation of the Old Irish Tract *Berrad Airechta*' in *Lawyers and Laymen: Studies in the History of Law presented to Professor Dafydd Jenkins on his seventy-fifth birthday*, ed. by T. M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd Owen and D. B. Walters (Cardiff, 1986), pp. 210-36: p. 215.

⁶² CIH 1769.26.

⁶³ eDIL, s.v. *gerta*.

⁶⁴ CIH 1759.37-1762.20. For a discussion of what this entailed see Bronagh Ní Chonaill, 'Child-centred Law in Medieval Ireland', in *The Empty Throne: Childhood and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. by R. Davis and T. Dunne (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 1-31: pp. 14-15.

gender specific: sewing and embroidery were taught to noble girls, use of the quern and kneading trough to lower classes.⁶⁵ In *Berrad Airechta* fosterage is described in this way: 'the father leaves him with whomsoever he chooses, i.e. for the sake of [learning] a craft or farming'.⁶⁶ It is surprising that the skills outlined above are rarely used in the literature as examples of what is learned during fosterage. Although education is important, it takes on a more fantastical guise in our narratives and the lessons themselves are subordinate to the emotional connection that is formed, since they are merely the means to form it.⁶⁷

For all their concern over what should be taught to the child and what he or she should wear, the laws are unclear on both the start and the end of fosterage. Regarding the starting point, it has often been said that fosterage begins at seven, as the examples from the hagiography demonstrate. The saints' lives that have fosterage beginning at seven years of age have been used as the basis for asserting that all fosterage occurs at seven years old.⁶⁸ Kelly points out that it could begin much earlier, as hinted at by references to nursing clothes in the equipment needed by a foster-mother.⁶⁹ Ní Chonail has commented on how this early start to fosterage goes some way to creating the long-lasting affective bonds: 'The age of seven has been regarded by historians as the time when fosterage commenced. However, the legal material points to the possibility of a child entering into fosterage at any age, however young. The practice of wet-nursing as an optional first step in the overall fostering process is evident from a special, lifelong entitlement (to a particular payment) which was formed between foster and biological children who shared the same cradle and mantle in the early stages of life within a household'.⁷⁰ From this we can see that the nutritive and educative fosterage bonds could have different time-frames, with education

⁶⁵ CIH 1760.21-34

⁶⁶ Stacey, 'Berrad Airechta', p. 215

⁶⁷ Hence children are not taught horsemanship but how to run as fast as the wind, how to wield a magic spear, and sometimes magic arts.

⁶⁸ Parkes, 'Celtic Fosterage', pp. 370-74

⁶⁹ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 86.

⁷⁰ Ní Chonail, 'Child-centred Law', p. 12.

beginning later. How these two models of fosterage interacted and affected the emotions created will be addressed throughout the thesis.

The indeterminacy continues throughout fosterage, as it is not clear when it should end. That it does end, as a legal bond, is made clear by the passing on of the *sét gertha*.⁷¹ There is also evidence for the end of fosterage being an emotionally fraught time, as seen in later Scottish ballads, mourning the end of fosterage.⁷² Yet, at what stage this separation was thought to usually occur, is unclear. Various ages are given. In *Berrad Airechta* and *Críth Gablach* the age at which fosterage ends is given as fourteen, whereas it is seventeen in *Bretha Crólige*, and *Cáin Íarraith* gives fourteen as the age of completion for a girl and seventeen for a boy.⁷³ An amount of indeterminacy in the laws is to be expected, but the blurring of the official beginning and end of fosterage may point to an appreciation of how the bond transcends legal bounds. The legal framework is a good start for our understanding of fosterage. Yet to fully appreciate the tie we must address the emotional as well as legal manifestations of fosterage. The emotional ties do not involve the exchange of goods and so are not recorded in the laws. Fosterage often works on a silent framework, on bonds that are not represented legally but that have deep social impact. Indeed, their ubiquity is what makes them silent. The common, obvious (to contemporaries) ways in which fosterage bonds worked through the lives of the participants is assumed in all the narratives. By interrogating these tales for what they present, unthinkingly, to the audience, I shall add to the partial picture of fosterage left to us by the legal texts. At the beginning of the discussion of fosterage in the laws, I pointed out two types of fosterage described in *Cáin Íarraith*: fosterage of love and fosterage of fee. These terms highlight that

⁷¹ *CIH* 1769.26.

⁷² Alison Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage: Highland Clanship, 1451-1609* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 80-5; Anne Frater, 'Women of the Gaidhealtachd and their Songs to 1750' in *Women in Scotland, c. 1100-c. 1750*, ed. by Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen M. Meikle (East Linton, 1999), pp. 67-79: pp. 74-6; Janay Nugent, '"Your louing childe and foster": The Fostering of Archie Campbell of Argyll, 1633-39' in *Children and Youth in Premodern Scotland*, ed. by Janay Nugent and Elizabeth Ewan (Woodbridge, 2015), pp. 47-64.

⁷³ Stacey, 'Berrad Airechta', p. 211; *Críth Gablach*, ed. by Daniel A. Binchy (Dublin, 1979), p. 2; 'Bretha Crólige', *Ériu* 12 (1938), 1-77: pp. 8-9; *CIH* 901.35-6; 902.4

tension in medieval law between law and love; between the judicial record and the conventional agreements made outside written law. Michael Clanchy has studied this tension in relation to English law and the institution of lovedays. Leaving aside the differences between the legal systems, his comments on the balance between law and love, and the undue attention the former has garnered are instructive for our own context: 'Law ... is easier to study than love and has traditionally been considered a more appropriate subject for a historian'.⁷⁴ I wish to add to our understanding of fosterage by teasing out the bonds of love that existed between fosterers and fosterlings, bonds that functioned alongside those of the law.

0.5. Cultural Parallels

It is tempting to see fosterage as another example of medieval Irish exceptionalism. Gerald of Wales describes fosterage as a particular vice of the Irish people: 'If this people has any love or loyalty, it is kept only for foster-children and foster-brothers'.⁷⁵ Where Irish sources see the loyalty between foster-brothers as laudable, outside commentators see it as negative and unnatural. In attempting to describe the emotional contours of this social practice, do we neglect parallels from other cultures by only looking at Irish sources? Is fosterage, in fact, a common way of creating emotional ties outside of the immediate family? I have attempted to include parallels from elsewhere in the medieval West throughout the thesis, but they do not undergo the same sustained analysis as the Irish material. In this section I will briefly outline how some of these parallel cultures treat fosterage differently from Ireland. Fosterage was a practice that many cultures engaged in and to some extent the emotional bonds will be similar to those formed in other cultures. Yet there is something unique about the role played by fosterage in medieval Irish society and this

⁷⁴ Michael Clanchy, 'Law and Love in the Middle Ages', in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. by John Bossy (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 47-67: p. 65.

⁷⁵ *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. by John J. O'Meara (London, 1951), p. 108.

cultural difference will affect the emotional community of fosterage.

When looking for parallels to Irish social custom, Wales is the first port of call. Parkes, in his many articles on the subject, is ready to see Celtic fosterage as a distinct social practice common to all Celtic speaking areas.⁷⁶ Without getting into any debates about the usefulness of Celtic as a term, for the medieval period an appeal to 'Celtic fosterage' is difficult to support, given the different natures of the sources. Modern commentators who hold that Irish fosterage and Welsh fosterage were parallel institutions, often have recourse to Irish material to fill out scant Welsh evidence.⁷⁷ This has led to McAll claiming that the very little legal evidence should lead us to conclude that children were not normally fostered in Wales.⁷⁸ While this may have been the case for girls, McAll's primary focus, the evidence for boys being fostered in a way that is similar to the picture we have of Irish fosterage, cannot be ignored. Anderson gives a nicely balanced view of the sources.⁷⁹ The picture that emerges is one of fosterage as similar but much less widespread than it is in medieval Ireland. In this culture, fosterage was one of many child-rearing options and a much less powerful force for social organisation. The linguistic similarities between the two languages, as regards fosterage, would suggest that at some point there was a similar practice in both countries. However, as we shall see for the other cultures, fosterage holds a much smaller place in the landscape of child-rearing in Wales; it is one of many choices, whereas in Ireland fosterage holds a central position.

When there is mention of fosterage in Welsh sources, it usually appears with references to Ireland. For example, in *Branwen verch Lyr*, the second branch of the

⁷⁶ Parkes, 'Celtic Fosterage', pp. 359-95; 'Fosterage, Kinship and Legend: When Milk was Thicker than Blood?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (2004), 587-615; 'Milk Kinship in Southeast Europe. Alternative Social Structures and Foster Relations in the Caucasus and Balkans', *Social Anthropology* 12 (2004), 341-58.

⁷⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, pp. 78-82; Llinos Beverly Smith, 'Fosterage, Adoption and God-Parenthood: Ritual and Fictive Kinship in Medieval Wales', *Welsh History Review* 16 (1992), 1-35: pp. 3-4.

⁷⁸ Christopher McAll, 'The Normal Paradigms of a Woman's Life in the Irish and Welsh Law Texts' in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff, 1980), pp. 7-22.

⁷⁹ Katherine Anderson, 'Urth Noe e Tat: The Question of Fosterage in High Medieval Wales', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 4 (2004), 1-11.

Mabinogi, Branwen bears a son to the king of Ireland and he is fostered out: ‘rodi y ma bar vaeth a wnaethpwynt ar un lle goreu y wyr yn Iwerdon’ ‘afterwards he was fostered in the best place for men in Ireland’.⁸⁰ It has been suggested that this demonstrates a Welsh knowledge of fosterage practices in Ireland.⁸¹ The association of Ireland and fosterage has a historical dimension in the life of Gruffudd ap Cynan. Gruffudd’s mother was of the Hiberno-Norse and he was raised in Ireland before claiming his patrimony in Gwynedd.⁸² Finally, Gerald of Wales has similarly disparaging things to say about Welsh fosterage as he does about the Irish practice. In the *Descriptio Kambriae* Gerald comments: ‘Another serious cause of dissension is the habit of the Welsh princes of entrusting the education of each of their sons to a different nobleman living in their territory. If the prince happens to die, each nobleman plots and plans to enforce the succession of his own foster-child (*alumnum*) and to make sure that he is preferred to the other brothers’.⁸³ This would suggest that fosterage in Wales was like that in Ireland and the only love Celtic peoples showed was to their foster-family. Yet we must always bear in mind Gerald’s political motivations for writing his two pieces, and Anderson has persuasively argued that in this instance he is thinking of one specific case of a foster-family working against the natal family.⁸⁴

Such fictive kin bonds, or alloparenting as it is sometimes known, were not restricted to the Celtic world. The Norse evidence is important, given the close connections between Norse and Irish culture from the ninth century. For example, *Njáls saga* gives Brian Boru a Norse foster-son, the son of his former enemy.⁸⁵ From Irish sources, evidence of fosterage between the two peoples in the Fragmentary

⁸⁰ *Branwen Verch Lyr*, ed. by Derick S. Thomson (Dublin, 1961), p. 8.

⁸¹ Anderson, ‘The Question of Fosterage’, p. 4.

⁸² *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, ed. by D. Simon Evans (Cardiff, 1978); David Moore, ‘Gruffudd ap Cynan and the Medieval Welsh Polity’, in *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, ed. by K. L. Maund (Woodbridge, 1996), pp. 1-60: pp. 23-7.

⁸³ *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe, (London, 1978), p. 261; *Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, ed. by John S. Brewer, James F. Dimock and George F. Warner, 8 vols (London, 1861-91), VI: *Itinerarium Kambriae et Descriptio Kambriae*, ed. by James F. Dimock (1868), p. 211.

⁸⁴ Anderson, ‘The Question of Fosterage’, p. 8.

⁸⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), p. 441; Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru: Ireland’s Greatest King?* (Stroud, 2007), p. 81.

Annals appears concerned with the effect the Norse upbringing was having on Irish people. The Gall-Gaídil, the Hiberno-Norse inhabitants of Ireland, or Irishmen who had forsaken their faith, are portrayed in a negative light: ‘Gall-Gaedil ... for they were men who had forsaken their baptism and they used to be called Norsemen, for they had the customs of the Norse, and had been fostered by them, and though the original Norsemen were evil to the churches, these were much worse, these people, wherever in Ireland they were’.⁸⁶ Ní Mhaonaigh has discussed these passages with regards to the creation of Norse and Irish identities in *Cogad Gaedel re Gallaibh* and *Njals Saga*.⁸⁷ The Irish are paganised and corrupted by the Norse through fosterage. The corrupting effect of being reared by a people thought to be dangerous is something that later English writers would decry as the negative effect of Irish fosterage on the English.⁸⁸

The Vikings are described as fostering Irish children in Ireland, but fosterage was also a thriving practice within their own lands. There are a number of law texts which prescribe the duties and process of fosterage, much as we have in Ireland.⁸⁹ Beyond the law texts the picture of fosterage is more complex. William Ian Miller distinguishes several types of fosterage arrangements and Gert Kreutzer considers fosterage as a composite of a number of different practices surrounding child-rearing.⁹⁰ Anna Hansen has criticised these views for relying too much on the complicated picture created in saga evidence and she bases her appreciation of the differences between legal fosterage and guardianship on *Grágás*.⁹¹ Norse fosterage has also been viewed as more restrictive than Irish fosterage. Fishwick has argued that fosterage only creates bonds with the immediate family, whereas in Ireland we see fosterage enacting

⁸⁶ *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. by Joan N. Radner (Dublin, 1978), pp. 104-05.

⁸⁷ Ní Mhaonaigh, *Brian Boru*, pp.86-7.

⁸⁸ Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, ed. by Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1894).

⁸⁹ *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1852).

⁹⁰ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), p. 122; Gert Kreutzer, *Kindheit und Jugend in Der Altnordischen Literatur* (Münster, 1987), pp. 223-29. Kreutzer also makes some comments about Irish fosterage, but these observations have been covered elsewhere in this Introduction.

⁹¹ Anna Hansen, ‘Fosterage and Dependency in Medieval Iceland and its Significance in *Gísla saga*’ in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* ed. by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden, 2008), pp. 73-86.

a wider net of association.⁹² The most striking difference between the two cultures is the greater range of terminology for the foster relationships in Irish. Where Irish has *oide*, *muime*, *dalta*, *comalta*, and *inailt*, Norse makes do with *fóstri*. This greater specificity may suggest a greater appreciation, in Irish, of the foster-family as a mirror of, rather than an addition to, the natal family.

The state of fosterage in Scandinavia and England is similar to that in Wales. It does exist and, in its emotional intensity, matches what we can see in the Irish model. For evidence, one need only examine the bond between Alexander Neckham and Richard I, and Saxo Grammaticus describes the particularly close relationship between the Danish king Valdemar and his foster-brother, Archbishop Absalon of Lund.⁹³ In both cases, a long-lasting bond of loyalty and friendship is created by sharing the nutritive breast. Fosterage was a common practice in Anglo-Saxon England and Crawford suggests that it began at seven, both for secular and ecclesiastical fosterage. She focuses on the political advantages of fosterage, much like the secondary sources on Irish fosterage.⁹⁴ Once again, fosterage – as understood in the Irish sources – provided just one mode of child-rearing in Anglo-Saxon England. In her discussion of fosterage Crawford highlights three versions, one more like wet-nursing, where the nurse would be taken into the family's home, one more like adoption, and one which functioned more like the fosterage I am examining.⁹⁵

The foregoing discussion of fosterage, as practised in other cultures in North-West Europe, is by necessity brief. However, I hope to have placed the Irish model of fosterage in its wider context. The model of Irish fosterage is not exceptional; the practice was recognised by the Norse and other writers looking at Ireland. Rather it would appear that, as in the Welsh situation described above, the practice of fosterage

⁹² Stephanie Fishwick, 'Unnatural Affections: Problems with Fosterage in *Íslendingasögur*', *Quaestio Insularis* 11 (2010), 21-35: p. 24. The wider net of Irish fosterage is most clearly examined in chapter three.

⁹³ Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066-1530* (London, 1984), pp. 11-12; *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Fisher, 2 vols (Oxford, 2015), II, book 14, §17.3.

⁹⁴ Sally Crawford, *Daily Life in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 69, 175.

⁹⁵ Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), pp. 122-23 ff.

was one among many different child-rearing options available in other cultures. In this sense, what I will have to say about fosterage would have implications for these other cultures. More importantly, how fosterage was woven into the fabric of Irish society makes their use of the practice culturally different and worthy of study in its own right.

0.6. The Chapters

As outlined earlier, the chapters move from a reconstruction of the ties that bind a foster-family together to the more metaphorical uses of fosterage. The case studies that constitute this thesis will leave us with a picture of the emotional community of fosterage, as described in medieval Irish literature. In this section, I will give a brief outline of each chapter's structure and how the problems addressed combine to outline the emotional community of fosterage in medieval Ireland.

The first chapter is concerned with the relationship of foster-fathers to their fosterlings. This takes as its central case study Cú Chulainn and the great list of foster-fathers that compete to foster him. Although Cú Chulainn is a central figure in medieval Irish literature, I argue that his multiple fosterage is something of an anomaly. His fosterage is placed alongside other famous examples of multiple fosterage to interrogate the normative role that multiple fosterage had. Beyond this, however the chapter analyses how foster-fathers interact with their fosterlings. Education was clearly an important facet of the relationship, since Cú Chulainn's potential foster-fathers compete by making clear what they would teach him. Education formed the basis for emotional closeness. Yet foster-fathers do not only relate to their fosterlings through education, they demonstrate care and active investment in the further lives of their charges.

Continued care and affection is something that lies at the heart of the next chapter that examines the role of foster-mothers. This emotional connection is accessed by analysing the position of the foster-family in the mourning process. Mourning is commonly thought to be a female preserve. Such a view comes, not only

from the Classical heritage but from the influential figure of Mary as the *Mater dolorosa*. The feminising of grief has been thought to result from semiotic difference between the sexes.⁹⁶ As Kristeva points out ‘nothing justifies Mary’s anguish at the foot of the cross unless it is the desire to feel in her own body what it is like for a man to be put to death, a fate spared her by her female role as source of life’.⁹⁷ Foster-mothers are often presented in a similar position, taking on the role of source of life. However, the view that only women are central to mourning has been challenged by recent studies.⁹⁸ The role of foster-mothers is not just confined to mourning, and a discussion of how foster-mothers’ care and influence extends after fosterage demonstrates their complementary role to that of the foster-father.

The longest foster relationship, one that lasted far beyond the legal period of fosterage, was that between foster-siblings. The third chapter is an attempt to answer the question, what makes a foster-sibling? We are presented with an ambiguous picture of how foster-sibling bonds were described and who was included in them. Foster-sibling ties relied on shared emotions and experiences created as young children under the care of the foster-mother. They were also expressed as a product of the shared education discussed in chapter one. The emotional connections were often called upon later in life, especially in times of conflict. While most sources present positive emotions displayed within fosterage, here we see some of the negative feelings that could be felt. Boll has examined conflict between foster-relations in her 2003 thesis.⁹⁹ Although outright conflict could not always be prevented, it was always disapproved of. Paying close attention to the vocabulary used between foster-siblings draws out some of the latent tensions that do not break out into full blown conflict.

An awareness of vocabulary allows us to see what was meant when someone

⁹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), pp. 151-80.

⁹⁷ Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, *Poetics Today* 6 (1985), 133-52: p. 144.

⁹⁸ Kristen Mills, ‘Grief, Gender, and Mourning in Medieval North Atlantic Literature’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 2013); Kaarina Hollo, ‘Laments and Lamenting in Early Medieval Ireland’ in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. by Helen Fulton, (Dublin, 2005), pp. 83-94.

⁹⁹ Boll, ‘Fosterkin in Conflict’.

was called a foster-sibling outside the foster-family. There are two groups for whom foster-sibling language was used in this more metaphoric way: among monastic students and among the *ffian*, the wild-living warrior-band exemplified by Finn mac Cumhaill. The evidence from monastic sources presents us with a picture of joint education, but one in which fosterage is surprisingly absent. The *ffian* are an interesting case, as they interact like foster-siblings, although they are too old to be in fosterage. In some cases, we see fosterage bonds from an earlier stage of life persisting and interacting with new bonds created during the time among the *ffian*. But still new relationships, created during the time in the *ffian*, were characterised in fosterage terms. Sometimes members of the *ffian* represent their relationships through the language of foster-brotherhood and at other times through foster-fatherhood. These shifts of seniority seen in foster language mirror shifts of power and authority within both monastic and *ffian* groups.

Chapter four examines fosterage in monastic settings and religious writings, in greater detail than previous chapters. The range of source material here necessitates a sharper focus. For example, focusing on just the saints' lives, Sharpe has estimated that there are more than one hundred Latin saints' lives and over fifty Irish saints' lives composed before the end of the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁰ It is a common trope of hagiography that the young saint has something unusual about his childhood, either precocious religiosity or a less exalted early start of barbarism and idiocy.¹⁰¹ In any case, childhoods, and the fosterage that forms such an important part of those childhoods, are prominent in our sources. That is not to mention the evidence from penitentials, martyrologies, poems, and elsewhere. Considering such a wealth of data, chapter four focuses on fosterage in two related cases. Firstly, beginning with the poem *Ísucán*, it focuses on how fosterage was used to understand and represent the religious people's relationship with the divine. Secondly, if relationships are forged with the numinous

¹⁰⁰ Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 5-6.

¹⁰¹ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 26-8.

through fosterage, then how clerics related to children in monasteries or within their care, can also be thought of as fosterage.

The rest of chapter four adds to our appreciation of the remark made by Charles-Edwards that ‘it seems to be the importance of fosterage in Ireland and Wales which made it difficult for spiritual kinship (the artificial kinship of godparents to godchildren and of godparents to natural parents) to make much headway’.¹⁰² The idea that fosterage occupied the space in the Irish medieval social imagination that other forms of spiritual kinship did in other cultures has implications, not only for the central position of the practice in medieval Irish culture but for how we view the Irish religious community.¹⁰³ Once again, Irish fosterage is markedly different from other examples of fosterage, as it takes such a central role in the creation of all quasi-familial emotional ties. The role of fosterage in the social imagination means that we cannot be satisfied with a definition of fosterage that relies on legal texts. The range of application of fosterage within religious texts means that each example must be viewed in its own light, either as referring to a metaphorical relationship, an actual fosterage bond, or something between the two. By bringing together many of these different case studies, I will show how fosterage coloured both medieval Irish spirituality and relationships within the religious community.

The final chapter is concerned with an even more unusual application of the fosterage relationship. If the fosterage bond was used to describe the relationship between a saint and God, chapter five examines its application to relationships lower down the cosmic hierarchy: between human and animal. There are many examples of wolves nurturing abandoned children, miraculous cows and deer providing milk for young saints, and of emotional bonds being forged between humans and animals. Once again, fosterage is the central metaphor for understanding such close ties, created through a shared nutritive bond. The approach to fosterage in these texts reinforces the image of fosterage created in the previous chapters. What is interesting to note, in

¹⁰² Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 78.

¹⁰³ See comments about the *anmchara*, Marie Therese Flanagan, *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge, 2010) p. 211.

this chapter's discussion of the early life of Ailbe and Cormac, is how fosterage humanises the wild beast, rather than the expected image of animals bestialising the humans whom they reared. When relationships between humans and animals are described as fosterage – and not all of them are – the bonds that are created are those of fosterage in all its emotional range. These last two chapters demonstrate how pervasive fosterage was in medieval Irish society. Here, we see the importance of studying all references to fosterage, not just the normative examples. I conclude the thesis with more thoughts on the methodological approach I have taken and suggestions of further research to be undertaken in the light of this new study.

0.7. Conclusion

The introduction and conclusion to this thesis provide the methodological base on which the research questions, addressed in each chapter, stand. I have outlined my approach to the history of emotions. I have taken Rosenwein's view of emotional communities and adapted it to fit the differing scales of the foster-family. The emotional community of the foster-family is also the model on which all foster-families base their emotional responses. The literature I study forms the culturally constructed lens through which the emotions of the medieval Irish foster-family were understood. Analysing the norms and unusual outliers of the emotional community of fosterage, I will create as accurate a picture as possible of how those emotions connected to fosterage were expected to be expressed. Sadly, this is as close to the lived emotion of medieval Ireland as we can get.

Fosterage was not an isolated social practice unique to Ireland. There have been various child-rearing practices which are different from the reliance on the nuclear family. The same can be said for those cultures interacting with medieval Irish culture, in the North Sea, during the Middle Ages. Ireland is not totally out of the ordinary, but the pervasive nature of fosterage in Irish society marks it out from other cultures in which fosterage formed one of many child-rearing options. Fosterage did not hold the

same position in other cultures, as the central means for understanding fictive kin relationships, that it did in medieval Irish culture.

I have discussed how each chapter will interact with the others, how the individual case studies and themes work together to provide a picture of the emotional community of fosterage in medieval Ireland. The limited time and space available to me mean that each chapter focuses on one major aspect of one type of fosterage bond. Yet, as the study progresses, we will find that similar concerns emerge; the foster-parents cannot be understood without the foster-children and some arguments will re-emerge in new places. Nutritive and educative fosterage work together to create emotionally strong bonds among members of the foster-family. The emotional basis for creating a foster-family, and how those emotions were expressed, need to be examined if we are to understand the impact of fosterage on medieval Irish society.

1. Multiple Fosterage and the Bond of Foster-Fatherhood

1.1. Introduction

Foster-fatherhood introduces several questions about the emotional community of fosterage. In medieval Ireland's patriarchal society, does the practice of fosterage really allow for the creation of an emotionally strong bond between foster-father and fosterling? Would the ties of blood be too strong? The evidence points to a deep emotional connection but the picture is complicated by the apparent prevalence of multiple fosterage – a foster-child would regularly have more than one foster-father. Thomas Charles-Edwards has said: 'It appears that an aristocratic boy might be fostered by several sets of foster-parents'.¹⁰⁴ How this multiple fosterage is enacted will necessarily affect the way the emotional community is created. Indeed, it was the previous assumption that it was the early and continued exposure to the foster-family that created close fosterage bonds, in preference to blood ties which became more distant.¹⁰⁵ If multiple fosterage was so widespread, then, foster bonds would be competing with other foster bonds as well as natal family for a child's affection.

In this chapter I will use the figure of Cú Chulainn to analyse multiple fosterage and how it affects the emotional connection between foster-fathers and their foster-children. His early life will be placed in its own textual context and contrasted with other figures, since the exceptional nature of Cú Chulainn cannot be fully understood in isolation. The Ulster Cycle of tales all seem to describe the same imagined past – characters and relationships seem to persist beyond the bounds of individual texts and the narratives themselves refer to the textual tradition they form part of. For this reason, it is tempting to use the evidence from one tale to shed light on another. Yet, as I shall demonstrate, this overreliance on an intertextuality that does not necessarily

¹⁰⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁵ Lisa Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Cornell, 1996), p. 94; Donnchadh Ó Córrain, 'The Education of Diarmait mac Murchada', *Ériu* 28 (1977), 71-81: p. 77.

imply continuity has led to a misunderstanding of Cú Chulainn's multiple fosterage. To fully understand the depiction of Cú Chulainn's fosterage, each text should be analysed on its own terms. Alongside a discussion of the supposed ubiquity of multiple fosterage, I will interrogate the picture of the supportive foster-father. What will emerge is a sense that multiple fosterage is not as normative as previously thought. Rather, long-lasting relationships are created between primary foster-fathers and fosterlings, with subordinate fosterages used to plug educational gaps. One bond forms the primary affective tie, even if this is not primary in a legal sense. The relationship with foster-fathers is characterised by education, which contrasts with the nutritive role of foster-mothers. Even so, all fosterage ties are marked by reciprocity and close affection, an affection expressed through the body, as well as through actions.

Cú Chulainn is the focus of this chapter for two reasons. Cú Chulainn holds a central position in the literature of medieval Ireland and in the historiography of fosterage.¹⁰⁶ He is the boy-hero of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley', the central text of the Ulster Cycle. Tales of the Ulster Cycle not only occur in many manuscripts, but its characters are incorporated into the synchronising histories of the twelfth century, making the Ulster Cycle central to Ireland's understanding of its place in world history. The poem *Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna* compares Ulster and Trojan heroes, highlighting their equivalence in contemporary thought.¹⁰⁷ Within the Ulster cycle Dooley sums up Cú Chulainn's role: 'the youth from the Ulster borderlands indeed bestrides his saga like a colossus'.¹⁰⁸ This also points to the centrality of Cú Chulainn in the secondary literature as an object of study himself, as well as in discussion of multiple fosterage.

Despite this central position, using Cú Chulainn as the model for fosterage would seem unusual. His conception and early life is told in *Compert Con Culainn* 'The

¹⁰⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 115; *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 79; Jaski, 'Gormac and *dalta*', passim; Bronagh Ní Chonaill, 'Fosterage: Child-rearing in Medieval Ireland', *History Ireland* 5 (1997), 28-31; Ó Córrain, 'The Education of Diarmait mac Murchada', 71-81; Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Sister's Son in Early Irish Literature', *Peritia* 5 (1986), 128-160.

¹⁰⁷ Francis John, Byrne, 'Clann Ollaman Uaisle Emna', *Studia Hibernica* 4 (1964), 54-94.

¹⁰⁸ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 6.

Conception of Cú Chulainn', *Feis Tighe Becfholtaig* 'The Feast of Becoltach's House', the *macgnímrada* 'The Boyhood Deeds', and in *Tochmarc Emire*, 'The Wooing of Emer'. These are by no means tales of a normal conception and childhood. He is fathered by Lug, the Otherworldly king, as part of a triple-conception. I will not be reading his birth as a pagan relic, but the exceptional nature of Cú Chulainn, as reflected in his birth, needs to be taken into account. In short, can this exceptional hero be viewed at all as normative? I believe he can, when due care and attention is taken in producing a normative model from this evidence.

What is the multiple fosterage that Cú Chulainn is an example of? While there is reference to the practice in some laws, it does not appear in *Cáin Íarraith* – the central text for our understanding of the legal aspects of fosterage. The secondary literature has, perforce, made much of the literary reflections of multiple fosterage, as embodied in the figure of Cú Chulainn but also appearing in Tírechán's life of Patrick and elsewhere. The texts in which Cú Chulainn's multiple fosterage is outlined exist in a complex manuscript relationship to one another. This relationship necessarily changes how we should read his multiple fosterage; when this is coupled with a close analysis of other descriptions of fosterage it will provide us with a new definition of multiple fosterage. I am not suggesting that multiple fosterage did not happen but there seems to always be a primary relationship, one that *could* be supplemented with additional training. This new picture is placed alongside other descriptions of fosterage, most notably Finn mac Cumail's, since he is the only other hero who has 'Boyhood Deeds'. The relationship to foster-fathers described above is finally analysed in other narratives, demonstrating the primacy of education to the creation of the relationship, but always maintaining the deep emotional connection.

1.2. Multiple Fosterage in the Laws and Elsewhere

I have addressed the legal outline of fosterage in the introduction. The main law text used, *Cáin Íarraith*, does not mention multiple fosterage. Yet some evidence

of the practice is found in the *Díre* tract. This law text, which deals with ‘honour-price’, includes how much compensation would be paid to each different fosterer if their foster-child were to be killed.¹⁰⁹ Although the text does not explain how it assumes multiple fosterage to work, it does lay out different levels of compensation for different grades of fosterer. The first fosterer (*frithoide*) receives full compensation, the second a half as much, the third a third and so on. One interpretation of this text is that the multiple fosterage is a consecutive practice with the main fosterer subletting, as it were, his fosterling to other fosterers. I am aware talking of subletting is a rather anachronistic way to approach the legal framework, but it is a useful analogy. The sources show us that the greatest affection need not be shown to the *frithoide*, although he holds a primary legal role. Indeed, in some sources we see the closest bond formed with a lower grade of fosterer. Once more the law texts are more concerned with transfer of goods than affection.

Aside from the *Díre* tract, one other text seems to mention multiple people raising a child. In *Córus Fine*, when discussing who should take vengeance, we find the following passage: ‘And vengeance for a fosterling of the kin, that is a fosterling raised commonly by the kin ... The fosterling and the *gormac* and the *mac fóesma*, the kin has right to honour-price for their killing’.¹¹⁰ This reference to the kin highlights the connection to a whole family created by the fosterage – something that stands distinct from the limited connections made by Norse fosterage, as noted previously. Although a large group of people could be interested in the fosterage, this does not necessarily imply a series of multiple fosterages. The laws mostly assume that the foster-child will stay with one family for the duration of their fosterage. For this reason, many previous overviews of fosterage place greater emphasis on literary sources to create a picture of multiple fosterage. My approach will reverse this model; that is to say, my first concern is with literary portrayals of multiple fosterage and from there I will build a picture of the practice, supplemented by the laws.

¹⁰⁹ CIH, 922.12-923.17.

¹¹⁰ CIH, 734.20-23.

The usual picture of multiple fosterage is outlined as follows. Charles-Edwards in his study *Early Christian Ireland* says of our hero: 'As befitted a nobleman, he had several fosterers, creating a network of alliances centred on Cú Chulainn himself'.¹¹¹ The connection between high rank and having many fosterers has been mentioned by Jaski: 'normally speaking, many foster-parents are indicative of the high status of the foster-child'.¹¹² The reason often given for high-status children to have a profusion of foster-parents is to cement alliances between families. This is the assertion of Ó Córrain¹¹³ and Charles-Edwards agrees, saying: 'nobles were especially hard-driven by the need to find political allies. It was this need which explained why any normal child of high status could expect to have more than one set of foster-parents'.¹¹⁴ The statement centralises the political as the sole motivating factor in foster relationships. When we turn to the narrative sources we see that multiple fosterage is not so common. The characters in these tales are almost all high-status and as such one would expect these concerns to be foremost in the writers' minds. Rather we have primary, intimate foster relationships established, to which others – and very few others at that – may be added. It may be that multiple fosterage was more commonly practised but in the normative world of the texts, one family is central. It is my intention to draw out the emotional ties that exist within this fictive family and to see how such emotions were motivating factors in and of themselves. I shall move the discussion away from the political towards the educative and affective. In this move we see multiple fosterage as a space for strong emotional bonds to be formed.

1.3. The Two Cú Chulainn Narratives

In this next section I will analyse two narratives of Cú Chulainn's early life. While the multiple fosterage tale is the one that receives the most attention in the

¹¹¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 82.

¹¹² Jaski, 'Gormac and *dalta*', p. 25.

¹¹³ Ó Córrain, 'The Education of Diarmait', p. 77.

¹¹⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 112.

secondary literature, I will show that it arises for specific narrative reasons and does not reflect the norms of society. The narrative originates in Cú Chulainn's boasting speech to Emer in *Tochmarc Emire* and this version of events then becomes attached to 'The Feast'. What initially appears as separate, mutually reinforcing attestations of multiple fosterage can be traced to one source that deliberately plays with the exaggerated number of fosterers. Even this multiple fosterage narrative has one family at the emotional heart of the tale; it cannot escape the presuppositions of fosterage. This tale will be contrasted with other narratives of fosterage that appear in The Conception of Cú Chulainn, The Boyhood Deeds, and throughout the *Táin*. In these texts, Cú Chulainn appears to have different foster-fathers. In 'The Conception' the smith Culann is said to be his foster-father; in 'The Boyhood Deeds' Conchobur seems to take on the role of foster-father; and in the *Táin* there is an interesting tension between how Fergus is portrayed as his foster-father, and how Scáthach is recalled as his foster-mother. This tension is even more acute when we bear in mind that they are not a couple, they represent two different periods of fosterage. This would seem to clearly show us multiple fosterage at work. However, in each tale the focus is on one fosterer, one central emotional relationship. This is the difficulty in using Cú Chulainn as a model. The concerns of the *Táin* are so centred on fosterage that the character accrues many more fosterage bonds than other comparable figures.

The texts mentioned exist in a complex relationship with one another, a relationship we must be careful not to treat as one of a unified, coherent whole. Such a tendency arises from the nature of the Ulster Cycle and the interrelationship of all the texts. The *Táin* is central to the Ulster Cycle. It is by far the longest text and includes 'The Boyhood Deeds' as a reported narrative. Beyond this other tales have been attracted to its central mass. There are a series of *remscéla* or 'fore-tales' which explain the political situation before the *Táin*. There are a number of continuations and death-tales for the major Ulster (and Connacht) heroes.¹¹⁵ 'The Conception of Cú Chulainn' and 'The Feast of Becfoltach' are both *remscéla*. Although all these tales

¹¹⁵ *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, ed. and trans. by Kuno Meyer (Dublin, 1906).

partake in the same imagined history, each tale presents its own version of that history. There is some compatibility between the narratives but we cannot assume that what is presented is a unified, internally consistent whole.

There are several similarities between the two stories that narrate Cú Chulainn's birth. They are still considered separate narratives, appearing side by side in some manuscripts, although some commentators regard them as different versions of the same tale.¹¹⁶ Although the majority of manuscripts containing these narratives date from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the tales themselves have been dated earlier.¹¹⁷ 'The Conception' is thought to be from the eighth century and 'The Feast' is reckoned to be slightly later, composed somewhere from the late eighth to the ninth century.¹¹⁸ The analysis begins with the narrative that appears in 'The Feast' and 'The Wooing of Emer'.

1.3.1 'The Feast' and 'Wooing' Narrative

In 'The Feast', after seeking his sister, Dechtire, Conchobur the king of Ulster and his retinue, spend a night in an unusual house. The woman of the house is on the point of giving birth and in the morning a child is found on the breast (*i mbrollach*) of Conchobur. He hands it over to Finnchóem, his other sister, to raise. As this happens, Sencha rises up saying: 'Ní ba si dono nonebla ... acht misi noneblaba 7 nonailfea' 'She is not the one to raise him ... but I myself shall raise him and nurture him'.¹¹⁹ This prompts a series of famous Ulster heroes to stand up and assert that they are best able to raise the child and the only one that should be allowed to do so. Sencha claims it

¹¹⁶ They appear together in MSS British Library, Egerton 1782, ff. 12vb-13rb and Royal Irish Academy, D iv.2, ff. 46rb-47v; Tomás Ó Conncheanainn, 'The Textual Tradition of *Compert Con Culainn*', *Celtica* 21 (1990), 441-55.

¹¹⁷ LU, ff. 128-128b; British Library Egerton 88, ff. 12vb- 13rb; RIA, 23 N 10, pp. 62-63; TCD, 1363, pp. 46-47; British Library, Egerton 1782, ff. 78v-80r; RIA, D iv 2, ff. 46rb-47v; National Library of Ireland, G 7, cols. 7-9.

¹¹⁸ CCC, p. 1.

¹¹⁹ FTB, p. 503.

based on a number of abilities, many of which remind one of a *fián*-band member;¹²⁰ Blái Briugu claims it on his largesse and wealth; Fergus on his ability as a warrior; and Amorgen on his intellect. When the warriors return to Emain Macha, Morann, the famous judge of the Ulaid, makes his judgement that all the named heroes shall have their hand in raising the boy and that 'it is thus that all will instruct him (*no ndamnaigfetar*), chariot-warriors, kings and chief-poets', presenting us with an idealised image of multiple fosterage:

"Atnoad Conchubur ém", ol Morann, 'ol is cét-aicce Finnchóem. Atmenad Sencha setait sceo erlabrai. Ra m-bíatha Blái Briugu. Berar do glún Ferguso. Ba aite dó Amorgen. Bad chomaltae dó Conall Cernach. Dí cích a máthar cích Finnchóeme. Ba cumma no n-damnaigfetar uili etir errid 7 rí 7 ollamain, ol bid carae sochaide in mac so. Is cumma dofich far n-enechgressa uili, arfich far n-áthu ocus far n-irgala uile in mac so."¹²¹

"Let him be entrusted, then, to Conchobur," said Morann, "because he is a relation of Finnchóem. Sencha will bestow on him wealth and fair-speech. Blái Briugu will feed him. Let him be given to the knee of Fergus. Amorgen will be his foster-father. Conall Cernach will be his foster-brother. The breasts of Finnchóem will be the two breasts of his mother. It is in this way that all will instruct him: chariot-warriors, kings and chief-poets, because this boy will be dear to a multitude. In the same way he will avenge the honour-contests of everyone, this boy will win for you in fords and battles".

The quotation encodes several different fosterage roles. In the first place Cú Chulainn is entrusted (*atnoad*) to the care of Conchobur, his maternal uncle.¹²² The role of the maternal kin is an important one in fosterage. It has been used to link fosterage with wider early medieval attitudes to the avunculate and Bitel has suggested

¹²⁰ The Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology defines the *fianna* as follows: 'When capitalized, this group of words refers to the band of warriors and hunters led by the mythical hero Fionn mac Cumhaill; this body may also be known as the Fianna Éireann and, less often, the Leinster Fianna. Not capitalized, the words may denote any bands of roving men whose principal occupations were hunting and war, or troops of professional fighting men under a leader, the *ríghéinnid* [fian-king]' (*Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, ed. by James McKillop (Oxford, 2004). The role of the *fián* warrior as fosterer is one that we can see occurring again and again in the literature so it seems fitting that this character be the first to strike up this fosterage debate. However, this is not Sencha's usual role in the Ulster cycle and his role as *fián* will be further elaborated below. For more on *fián* see Kim McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fíanna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland', *CMCS* 12 (1986), 1-22 and Joseph F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985).

¹²¹ CCC, p. 8.

¹²² See Appendix 1 for a genealogy.

that fosterage was used to give the maternal kin some legal influence over a child.¹²³ In 'the Boyhood Deeds' Conchobur's role is made more of, portrayed as the primary fosterer. In this passage though, he merely has power over the child – presumably as a result of his power over all the Ulstermen. However, while 'entrusted', *atnoad*, in the Egerton manuscript implies a more supervisory role, in D iv 2, the verb is *ailed*, the more usual verb for 'fosters'.¹²⁴ This introduces some ambiguity as to who is the fosterer of Cú Chulainn, with Conchobur's position in D iv 2 possibly arising from his role in 'The Boyhood Deeds'. An awareness of this intertextuality suggests one of the ways in which Cú Chulainn's multiple fosterage has come about: by taking each individual story, and the foster-relationship presented therein, and combining them in one unified picture of many different foster-fathers. However, concentrating on the Egerton reading, we see that the fosterage language is reserved for Amorgen, and his son Conall. They form Cú Chulainn's foster-family, to which the other heroes are added. It is interesting to note that the fosterage terminology is not used for Finnchóem. Rather her role in his life is defined by the physical act of feeding and nourishing him from her breasts. Bláí Briugu provides solid food, and Sencha riches.

Yet, Finnchóem's role as foster-mother is not reduced. Earlier in the tale she is said to take an instant liking to the child: 'Doécci Finnchóem in mac íarom. "Carais mo chridesea in mac so", ol Finnchóem.' 'Finnchóem saw the boy then, "I love that boy with all my heart", she said'.¹²⁵ Her affection lies at the heart of the judgement of Morann. By making the child a fosterling of all the Ulstermen 'this boy will be dear to a multitude'.¹²⁶ This looks as if it represents the kind of communal raising mentioned in *Corús Fine*, as examined above in the section on laws and multiple fosterage. I suggest that this is in fact a heroic exaggeration, something often seen in the character of Cú Chulainn. It takes the deep emotions felt by one foster-family and spreads them

¹²³ Bremner, 'Avunculate and Fosterage', passim.; Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Sister's Son', 128-160; Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 108-09.

¹²⁴ British Library, Egerton 1782, ff. 78v-80r; RIA, D iv 2, ff. 46rb-47v.

¹²⁵ CCC, p. 7

¹²⁶ CCC, p. 8

to the whole of Ulster; the early life of the hero foreshadows the way he, alone, will defend the whole province.¹²⁷ His exaggeratedly heroic deeds stem from an exaggeratedly heroic upbringing. There are other examples of such corporate fosterage. In *De maccaib Conaire* 'On the sons of Conaire', a tale preserved in the Book of Leinster, when Fiacha comes to Tara he was welcomed: 'fobíth ba dalta dóib uile 7 ba mac na rígha' 'for he was a foster-son to them all and the son of the queen'.¹²⁸ I suggest this text, like *Cú Chulainn* 'the fosterling of the Ulstermen', works to highlight the high esteem in which Fiacha is held, rather than to imply a direct fosterage.

The narrative of *Feis Tige Becfoltaig* has an unusual textual history. The competition, the list of fosterers, and the education they offer appear almost identically in *Tochmarc Emire*, 'The Wooing of Emer'.¹²⁹ *Tochmarc Emire* appears in a number of recensions and the version which includes the fosterage material is the later of two recensions; this last version of the tale seems to be compilatory in nature and it seems to have come into being sometime in the twelfth century.¹³⁰ The relative dating of 'The Feast' and 'The Wooing' would suggest that 'The Wooing', the later tale, borrowed the multiple fosterage narrative from the tale of the birth and early life of *Cú Chulainn*. However, Ó Concheanainn has demonstrated that the fosterage competition made its way into 'The Feast' through an interpolation added to the end of 'The Conception' in our earliest manuscript, the twelfth century *Lebor na hUidre*.¹³¹ The argument is made more clearly and in greater depth in his own work, but for our purposes I will summarise as follows: a later scribe, known as H, came across *Cú Chulainn*'s speech in 'The Wooing' and, as this shed much more light on *Cú Chulainn*'s early life and upbringing, added a version of this to the end of 'The Conception', after erasing whatever ending the tale had originally.¹³² It is worth noting, at this stage, that much

¹²⁷ This is highlighted in Jaski's review of *Cú Chulainn*'s relationship to his maternal kin in Ulster. Jaski, 'Gormac and dalta', pp. 14-15.

¹²⁸ Lucius Gwynn, 'De maccaib Conaire' *Ériu* 6 (1912), 144-53; p. 148.

¹²⁹ Kuno Meyer, 'The Oldest Version of *Tochmarc Emire*', *RC* 11 (1890), 433-457; CCC, pp. 16-68.

¹³⁰ Gregory Toner, 'The Transmission of *Tochmarc Emire*', *Ériu* 49 (1998), 71-88.

¹³¹ Ó Concheanainn, 'The Textual Tradition of *Compert Con Culainn*', p. 450.

¹³² The current appreciation of the scribal activity in *Lebor na hUidre* points to multiple scribe Hs (Elizabeth Duncan, 'A History of Gaelic Script, A.D. 1000-1200' (unpublished doctoral thesis,

of the interpolated section in *Lebor na hUidre* is illegible due to damage on that corner of the page. It finally breaks off midway through the first speeches of the competition. This bolted-on addition latterly became more organically incorporated into the narrative and this is what we see in 'The Feast'.

The very direct copying of the multiple fosterage narrative, taken from the dialogue of Cú Chulainn and Emer in *Tochmarc Emire*, will naturally alter our reading of 'The Feast'. It is not merely a case of critical influence, but rather the wholesale lifting of text. To understand the fosterage presented in 'The Feast' we need to investigate how it was presented in 'The Wooing', the original text. 'The Wooing of Emer' is a tale in the Ulster cycle, in which Cú Chulainn, surprisingly enough, woos Emer, the daughter of Forgall Manach. The girl's father is hostile to the match but after Cú Chulainn and she exchange a riddling dialogue, the two young lovers' hearts are set on each other. To forestall the marriage Forgall makes Cú Chulainn journey far to the west to learn great skills of arms and become the greatest warrior in Europe. After many adventures and difficulties, he comes to the fort of the warrior-woman Scáthach. She teaches him all the warrior arts she knows, even the mysterious *gae bulga*, and after aiding her in battle against another warrior-woman, Cú Chulainn returns to Ireland. He rescues Emer from the fort her father had built around her, kills her father and some of her brothers and the two live happily ever after.

The presentation and use of fosterage is affected by its position as part of the wooing dialogue. On the one hand, Cú Chulainn uses the list of fosterers to describe how excellent a match he would make. Fosterage has a clear role in defining his status within society; it is dependent not just on his parentage, which is not focussed on. The fact that he is not reared 'between the flagstones and the trough, or at the wall away from the fire', highlights the social considerations to be found in a practice that is available to the lowest rank of freeman as well as the highest rank of king. There are numerous examples of noble children reared below their status and the subsequent

University of Aberdeen, 2010)), where Best previously posited the work of only one scribe (R. I. Best, 'Notes on the script of *Lebor na hUidre*', *Ériu* 6 (1912), 161-74).

elevation of their fosterers. Mess Buachalla has this status clash encoded in her name, The Servant of the Cowherds.¹³³ Buchet is ennobled after his foster-daughter, Ethne, marries the king of Ireland.¹³⁴ This latter example also emphasises how often the fosterers have a role in arranging the marriages of their charges. This is important for the way Cú Chulainn presents himself to Emer, as his fosterer does not speak for Cú Chulainn, the fosterling creates, through dialogue, his fosterers.

The later action of the tale makes it seem as if Scáthach is the principal fosterer, not those Cú Chulainn mentions. Indeed, her role as foster-mother is made much of in the *Táin*. This reinforces the difference between Cú Chulainn's speech about his multiple fosterers and any reality it might have, even on the level of the text. The role of Scáthach highlights how multiple fosterage could be achieved, albeit in a much less widespread sense than "the whole of Ulster". The fosterage competition is introduced into the story when Cú Chulainn and Emer are engaged in riddling, allusive, flirting dialogue designed to test the suitability of each potential partner. The riddling test is fully explored in Findon's study, *A Woman's Words*. She investigates how Emer's speech is powerful both in terms of driving the narrative and in creating her own character. Describing the initial wooing speech, Findon says: 'The arcane riddling speech employed by the couple serves to establish their equality in mental and verbal dexterity. Each stages him- or herself through speech, testing the other while at the same time promoting the self'.¹³⁵ In this context, we must note that the list of multiple fosterers forms part of Cú Chulainn's self-constituting speech. To make himself appealing to Emer he is making himself out to be *samildánach*, 'possessing every skill', an important feature for a hero. Placing the list in the dialogue, in the mouth of Cú Chulainn, during a speech in which he plays all sorts of word games, forces us to re-evaluate its narrative function. It no longer has the objective force of third person

¹³³ TBDD, p. 3.

¹³⁴ *Fingal Rónáin*, ed. Greene, pp. 28-31.

¹³⁵ Joanne Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (Toronto, 1997) p. 40.

narration. Cú Chulainn is seen to manipulate and reframe his fosterage for personal ends.

Within the wider setting of the riddling dialogue, this section would appear the most readily intelligible. There are no allusions to the wider literature, nor does it have to be glossed in the subsequent episode, in which Cú Chulainn explains what was going on to his charioteer, Lóeg. However, it would be extremely unusual to include a completely straightforward section here. I suggest that the list of foster-fathers should be analysed in the same allusive, riddling light as the rest of his speech. In this sense, what is being represented is not an “accurate” description of fosterage but another verbal play. Cú Chulainn's word play is evident in how he describes his foster-fathers. In a conversation full of lists, he uses a variety of verbal constructions to represent his fosterage:

"Maith ém rom ebladsa, a ingen," ol sé, "lam phopae Conchobar. Ní hamlaid fogní aithechán forbugud a chlainne. Ní etir leic 7 lossait nó ó thenid co fraig nó for blaí óenirlainde rom alt-sa la Conchobar, acht etir errethaib 7 anraib, etir drúthaib 7 druídib, etir filedaib 7 fissidib, etir briugadaib 7 bíatachaib Ulad rom forbaigedsa, co filet a mbéasa 7 a ndána uili liumsa".

"Citné and didiu rot eblatar isna gnímaib sin móidisiu?" ol Emer.

"Ní hansae ém", ol sé, "Rom ebail Sencha Sobélaid conidam trén, trebar, án, athlam athargaib. Am gáeth i mbrethaib. Nídam dermatach. Adgládur nech ria túaith trebair. Arfoichlim a n-insci. Cocertaim bretha Ulad uili 7 nís n-insorg tria ailemain Sencha form.

Rom gab Blaí Briugu cucaí for aicci a treibe cor ferad mo théchtae oca. Conid íarom adgairim firu cóicid Conchobuir imma rí. Nos bíathaim fri ré sechtmaine. Fossuidiur a ndánu 7 a ndíberga. Forriuth a n-enech 7 a n-enechgressa.

Rom alt Fergus conid rubaim trénócu tri nert gaile 7 gaiscid. Conidam túalaing airer críche do imdítin ar echtrandaib. Am amnas ar gail 7 ar gaisciud. Am dín cach dochraid. Am sonn slaide cach sochraid. Dognú sochur cach thrúaig. Dognú dochur cach thrúin tri altrom Fergus form.

Ro siachtus glún Amairgin filed coro molaim rí as cach feib i mbí, co ndingbaim óenfer ar gail, ar giasciud, ar gais, ar áini, ar amainsi, ar chirt, ar chalmatus. Dingbaim cach n-errid 7 ní tuillim buidi do neoch acht do Chonchobur.

Rom ergair Finnchoem conid comaltae com-lúid dom Conall Cernach coscorach. Rom thecoisc Cathbad cóemaigne diag Deichtire. Conidam fissid fochmairc i cerdaib dé druídechta. Conidam éolach i febaib fiss. Ba cummae romaitsat Ulaid uili, etir araid 7 errid, etir rí 7 ollamain. Conidam cara slúaigh 7 sochaide. Conid chummae dofichim a n-enechgressa uili."¹³⁶

¹³⁶ CCC, pp. 28-30.

"I was, indeed, raised well, girl," he said, "by my uncle Conchobur.¹³⁷ He does not treat an offspring of his people like a churl. I was not reared by Conchobur between the flagstones and the trough or at the wall away from the fire or with the provision of a poor man, but among champions and warriors, among jesters and druids, among poets and wise men, among hostellers and quartermasters of the Ulad I was brought to fruition, so that I have all their customs and skills."

"Who is it that raised you, then, in these most excellent abilities?" Emer said.

"Not difficult that," he said, "Sencha Sobélraid raised me so that I am strong, solid, glorious and swift at wounding. I am shrewd in judgements. I am not forgetful. I speak to anyone on behalf of a strong people. I prepare their statements. I correct the judgements of all the Ulad and do not discard them because of the rearing Sencha gave me.

Blaí Briugu took me to him on account of the kinship of his race, so my rightful portion was given by them. I invite the men of Conchobur's province with their king and I entertain them for a week. I settle their gifts and their spoils and I aid them in their honour and their fines.

Fergus has reared me so that I slay strong-warriors through strength of arms and valour; so that I can defend the border of the territory against foreign foes. I am severe in valour and warrior-deeds. I am the protection against all evil. I am the staff that incites everything beautiful. I make shelter for every wretch. I make mischief for every strongman through my rearing with Fergus.

I approached the knee of Amorgen the poet, so that I can praise a king for every excellence he has. So I can repel any man in valour, in warrior-deeds, in wisdom, in splendour, in cleverness, in justice, in boldness. I can repel every chariot-warrior and I do not spare thanks to any except Conchobur.

Finnchóem has cared for me so that Conall Cernach the victorious is my equally-vigorous foster-brother. Cathbad of the gentle face has taught me for the sake of Deichtire, so that I am a skilful student of the arts of the god of druidism, so that I am learned in all levels of knowledge. All the Ulaid have equally raised me both charioteers and chariot-warriors, both kings and chief-poets. In this way I am dear to the host and the multitude and I fight for the honour of them all alike.'

Verbal play is used to create identity and so the verbs used in this passage merit further discussion as they are all associated with fosterage. The opening paragraph outlines Cú Chulainn's argument: he was raised among all the men of Ulster, such that he has taken on all their skill. This section highlights Conchobur's role as his fosterer, taking part in his raising (*rom ebladsa; rom alt-sae*). These are different forms of the commonest verb associated with fosterage: *Ailid*. This is rendered in DIL as 'nourishes, rears, fosters'. It is explicitly associated with the Latin root *alo* in the minds of the Irish,

¹³⁷ I have translated *popae* here as uncle in order to convey the sense of affection and respect given to an older male friend. There is no suggestion of a biological link in the Irish (although Conchobur and Cú Chulainn are actually related), but rather a sense of closeness. This is something that comes out in Cú Chulainn's interaction with Fergus in the body of the *Táin*, where Fergus is depicted as Cú Chulainn's foster-father.

as the entry for *altram*, the verbal noun, in *Sanas Cormaic* demonstrates.¹³⁸ So while this can be rendered as merely fostering, it includes a sense of feeding. The nuance to the verb is most clearly seen when it is used of the rearing of animals. In these instances, the rearing is mostly of young animals that do not have a mother.¹³⁹ Here it places Conchobur in the central role of fosterer. This is set alongside the long list of learned men and warriors among whom the boy was ‘brought to fruition’ (*rom forbaigedsa*). These anonymous teachers, referred to in his first speech, are nameless, passive and described with no affection. Their presentation is contrasted with his later statement that, ‘all the Ulaide have equally raised me (*romaltsat*)’, made after another goading comment from Emer. We can see how the duelling dialogue makes Cú Chulainn adapt his story, to make the young man appear more than what he seems. He says that he was raised by Conchobur, but Emer pushes him by asking again ‘who is it that raised you?’. This leads to him going off on his list, starting with Sencha, who also is said to have raised him (*rom ebail*). The second speech adds fosterers and detail in response to Emer.

Describing his fosterage with Amorgen, he uses the phrase ‘I approached the knee of Amorgen’. The knee is often used in connection with fosterage. If the breast of the woman is seen as the female site of fosterage, it can be argued that the knee forms the male physical site of fosterage. The knee’s connection with fosterage is seen in the *glún*, knee, of the compound *glúndalta*, another term for fosterling. This compound has been analysed by Loth and Thurneysen.¹⁴⁰ The associations between knees and education are seen throughout the corpus in the phrase ‘the knee of knowledge’, used as short hand for a good education.¹⁴¹ In terms of fosterage, the symbolic value of the knee is seen in the opening to *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, when Domnall has a prophetic

¹³⁸ ‘Sanas Cormaic’, ed. Meyer, p. 9.

¹³⁹ TBC LL, p. 25; *Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó*, ed. by Rudolf Thurneysen (Dublin, 1935), p. 6.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Loth, ‘Le mot désignant le genou au sens de génération’, *RC* 40 (1923), 143-152; Rudolf Thurneysen, ‘Mittelir. *glún-dalta* “Knie-siehsohn”’, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 47 (1930), 169-72.

¹⁴¹ AFM, 670; *Iomarbhágh na bhfileadh: The contention of the bards*, ed. by Lambert McKenna, 2 vols, (London, 1918), II, pp. 224-25.

dream about a dog that he raises: 'the pup that he raised (*ro h-ailed*), called Fearglonn. The dog went in contention away from him, from his very knee (*fora glún fesin*)'.¹⁴² This is interpreted as a prophecy of Domnall's foster-son turning on him. The physical proximity represented by the knee makes the betrayal more visceral.

At the other end of the spectrum in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, the childhood of Lugaid Mac Con and Eogan mac Ailella is described as: 'for óenglún 7 óenchích ro alta' '[They] were nursed on the one knee and at the one breast'¹⁴³ and in the *Triads* the three sacred things of the Irish are: 'cích, grúad, glún' 'breast, cheek, knee'.¹⁴⁴ Loth has pointed out that there is a close association between *glún*, and the word for generation, from at least the eighteenth century onwards.¹⁴⁵ Whatever we think about the ultimate origins of this association, the image of the knee as a physical expression of rearing is an affective one. It speaks of the physical intimacy that forms the basis of the foster relationship, since it is often placed alongside the image of the breast, as one of nurturing connection. That is not to say that the breast and knee are totally equivalent. The functions performed by the different body parts rule out total equivalence. It is interesting to see, though, that they occupy an equivalent metaphorical space, alongside the more neuter chest, *ucht*. The affective imagery is warranted in the case of Amorgen who, although not the most famous of Cú Chulainn's foster-fathers, is the father of Conall Cernach. Conall Cernach is Cú Chulainn's foster-brother who avenges his death in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*.¹⁴⁶ All the members of Amorgen's family appear as Cú Chulainn's foster-family in this list; even when he tries to frame himself as a mighty warrior, the whole foster-family appears as an affective unit.

The final, female element of this family is Finnochóem, who is mentioned next in the list of fosterers. She appears alongside his foster-brother Conall Cernach, and her role in fostering is intimately tied to the creation of a family unit, rather than

¹⁴² *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, ed. by Ruth P. M. Lehmann (Dublin, 1964), p. 2.

¹⁴³ CMM, pp. 38-9.

¹⁴⁴ *Triads*, ed. Meyer, p. 8.

¹⁴⁵ Loth, 'Le mot désignant le genou', p. 148.

¹⁴⁶ *The Death of Cú Chulainn: A critical edition of the earliest version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, ed. by Bettina Kimpton (Maynooth, 2009), pp. 44-5.

education. Although it would seem odd to discuss foster-mothers and foster-brothers, in a chapter on foster-fathers, I would be remiss if I was to ignore this section of Cú Chulainn's speech. How these necessary participants in the fosterage community are addressed, in a dialogue in which masculine attributes are consistently emphasised, illuminates fosterage's role in creating a masculine identity. They are present, but downplayed. The intent of the speech is clear, yet the interwoven nature of the foster-family means Finnochóem and Conall cannot be ignored entirely. The whole reference to her is only one sentence and even within that she is only used to prove Cú Chulainn's connection to his foster-brother. The verb used is similarly distant, *rom ergair*, the conjunct form of *ar-gair*, which DIL renders as 'forbids, hinders, prevents' with the associated meaning of 'herding'. This translates into fostering since it is an act of tending or protecting. We can note here, that the associated verb *in-gair* is used in a poem seeking the Virgin Mary's protection on the day of judgement.¹⁴⁷

Cú Chulainn's speech emphasises the manly traits that he has learned from his foster-fathers, so adding more foster-fathers adds to his skills. Although Finnochóem does make an appearance, it is not the emotionally deep connection we saw in 'The Feast'. The more instrumental nature of this collection of foster-fathers concentrates on the masculine presentation of Cú Chulainn. While he is testing Emer with his riddling speech, she is testing him too, forcing him to exaggerate his skills, as Findon has pointed out.¹⁴⁸ This begins with the question Emer poses that elicits the long explanation of his fosterage: 'Those are good fights for a tender young boy (*móethmacáim*) ... but you have not yet reached the strength of a chariot-warrior'.¹⁴⁹ It has already been noted how Emer's speech in this tale constitutes herself but it also shapes her interlocutor and in stressing the lack of his manly strength, she prompts Cú Chulainn to concentrate more on the masculine skill he has learned from his fosterers. Concern over his age and masculinity is seen in the use of *macáim*. Although its

¹⁴⁷ Salvador Ryan, 'The Persuasive Power of a Mother's Breast: The Most Desperate Act of the Virgin Mary's Advocacy', *Studia Hibernica* 32 (2002/2003), 59-74: p. 61.

¹⁴⁸ Findon, *A Woman's Words*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁹ CCC, p. 28.

definition is difficult to pin down 'the semantic focus shifts between the three nodal meanings "young man", "young warrior" and "attendant, servant"'.¹⁵⁰ In this case, our hero would be all the more concerned to distance himself from his foster-mother and establish his role among the men of Ulster. Another definition of *macáim* highlights its position on the verge of adulthood, a stage Cú Chulainn would wish to enter.¹⁵¹ He presents his fosterage as a *fait accompli* to show his age, although he goes off on another fosterage later in the tale.

The picture of multiple fosterage in *Tochmarc Emire* is unusual, as it forms a part of Cú Chulainn's dialogue with Emer. It has already been noted that their conversation is used both as a test of their excellence and a way of creating that excellence. They both create their identities by what they say, how they select and communicate information about their past and families. In this way the speech acts of Cú Chulainn and Emer mirror how the text itself was put together, in such a way that the contemporary audience would be aware of how these identities were to be constructed. Cú Chulainn and Emer make themselves from different speech acts. The text of 'The Wooing' has also been compiled from extracts from other texts. In the words of Toner '[The Wooing]', therefore, is a careful work of scholarship, in which the redactor has endeavoured to assemble all the available materials relating to Cú Chulainn's courtship of Emer and his training in arms to produce a lucid and compelling biography of the greatest of the Ulster heroes'.¹⁵² The fact that such a work is a compilation itself, means that the author is aware of how meaning is constituted and created as a collage and we, as readers, must be aware of how identity is similarly constructed in the tale. Cú Chulainn presents himself as the ideal hero, possessing all the qualities of the Ulstermen, so he draws heavily on the masculine heroes and cites them all as his foster-fathers.

This explains the unusual fosterage competition that appears in 'The Feast'. It began life as part of an elaborate dialogue, Cú Chulainn falling into exaggeration after

¹⁵⁰ Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Irish Maccóem, Welsh Makwyf', *Ériu* 42 (1991), 27-36: p. 32.

¹⁵¹ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, p. 125.

¹⁵² Toner, 'Transmission of *Tochmarc Emire*', p. 88.

he has been verbally goaded, as he does in the *Táin*. When listing skills, it is interesting to note that the emphasis is on the foster-fathers and the masculine education he has received. Finnchóem's love for the mystery child is explained by Bricriu as coming from her connection to him: 'Indeed, there is little between them in your eyes', said Bricriu, 'that is, between your own son and the son of your true-sister, Dechtire'.¹⁵³ This connection to maternal kin is an important aspect of fosterage and that characterises Cú Chulainn and Conchobur's relationship. The closeness between Conchobur and Cú Chulainn is presented in one of the alternate tales of the young hero's fosterage that I will address below.

1.3.2 'The Conception' and *Táin* narratives

The other tale of Cú Chulainn's birth does not have a competition over who should foster the child. Instead, it presents us with a single fosterer. This is the pattern that we see in the other narratives of the Ulster Cycle: Cú Chulainn has a single foster-father, although his identity can change with each narrative. In other tales from the Ulster Cycle we do not see the multiple, simultaneous fosterage he described in *Tochmarc Émire*, but a more restricted serial fosterage. I shall examine the role of Culann as fosterer, both in 'The Conception' and in 'The Boyhood Deeds'. 'The Boyhood Deeds' begin with a young Cú Chulainn leaving the family home and journeying to Emain Macha. As he is older here than the babe-in-arms of 'The Feast', the concentration is more on the secondary, educative fosterage. I will begin with the fosterage as described in 'The Conception'. This tale ends with a version of the naming narrative found in the body of the *Táin*. Sétanta (the name Cú Chulainn has at birth) kills the hound of the smith Culann and as compensation takes the dog's place and Culann's name.

¹⁵³ FTB, p. 502.

Ba torrach aitheruch ellam. Birt mac. Gabsi Caulann cerd. Ba sí a aite. Marbaisseom a choin side íarom, in tan ba ngillae oc cluichiu, combu íarom asbertsom: 'Bid meisse do chúso, a phopae'. Conid de ran gúil seom íarom Cú Chulainn.¹⁵⁴

She became pregnant again. She gave birth to a son. Culann the smith took him and he was his foster-father. The youth killed his dog when he was playing. Afterwards he said 'I will be your dog, oh father'. So it is because of this he was thereafter Cú Chulainn [Culann's Dog].

This narrative is more laconic than the one from 'The Feast'. In this tale Dechtire comes with her brother on an expedition. The line about her falling pregnant again is part of the 'triple conception' of Cú Chulainn. This particular narrative does not concern us now, suffice it to say that the conception of Cú Chulainn by an Otherworldly figure has led Jaski to interpret Cú Chulainn as a child of a foreigner, thus the responsibility of his maternal kin, like Bres mac Elatha and Cairpre Liphechair.¹⁵⁵ After Dechtire gives birth to a boy, he is given to Culann the smith to raise. Culann's role is made clear and then Cú Chulainn kills his dog and takes its place. Culann is merely called the foster-father, *aite*.¹⁵⁶ The verbal play of 'The Feast', while a rich source for criticism, is not the usual way fosterage is described. Beyond his being called *aite* we can identify Culann as foster-father as fosterage is often associated with name change throughout the literature and elements of such name changing are seen in the annals. Furthermore, Culann's role as a *cerd*, is a position in society we find linked to fosterage in other narratives. While for Culann this word is usually rendered as "smith" in other places it can be translated as "poet". This ambiguity and relation of *cerda* to fosterage has been noted before, especially by Nagy.¹⁵⁷ The possession of a special skill to pass on as part of the educative nature of fosterage, forms a key part of the ideology surrounding it.

In 'The Boyhood Deeds' Culann is not referred to as Cú Chulainn's foster-father. Yet despite this, there are parallels between Culann's role in the *Táin* and that of the foster-father. The most striking is the change of name that is associated with him. Name change seems to be something particularly associated with fosterage as

¹⁵⁴ CCC, p. 6.

¹⁵⁵ Jaski, 'Gormac and dalta', p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ CCC, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, p. 108.

Verstraten has noted for the later period: 'Nicknames were used throughout the middle ages and were regularly taken from the place or area where the person in question was reared'.¹⁵⁸ She cites for example Donnchadh Cairbreach Ua Brian, who was fostered in Carbury and the possible link between the Pippard and Mac Mathgamhna families represented by Roalbh Mac Mathgamhna taking the name Ralph, common among the Pippards but not seen in the Mac Mathgamhna line before.

This trend is also reflected in the narrative literature of the period under study. In *Eachtra Conaill Gulbain* the eponymous character Conall receives his epithet Gulbain, from the hill where he was taught the running-feat by his foster-father: 'do-
gnídh Conall an cleas sin gach laoi, fiadh an laochraidh conadh edh at-beirtis na sluaigh
as calma reithes Conall Gulban' 'Conall performed this feat every day before the
warrior-troop so that the host called him Conall Gulbain because of the speedy act'.¹⁵⁹
In the *Life of Findchú* Cairbre Crom is so called 'because of his fostering in Crom-
glais'.¹⁶⁰ In *Cath Maige Léna* Eoghan Mór has an alternative appellation Mogh
Nuadhad, which means the slave of Nuadha: 'Agus is aire at-beirthí in t-ainm sin ris .i.
Nuadha Derg mac Dáirine oirrígh do rígaib Muman ro oil hé' 'And this is the reason
he was called by this name, Nuadha Derg son of Dáirine high-king of the kings of
Munster fostered him'.¹⁶¹ The name element *mess* is used with fosterer's names as
well.¹⁶² For example, Mess Buachalla, The Herdsman's Fosterling, the name given to
Étaín in *Tochmarc Étaíne* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*.¹⁶³ This parallels the name
changes religious characters undergo on entering a monastery, for example Tairchell's
name is changed to Moling immediately before he takes the tonsure and goes to study

¹⁵⁸ Freya Verstraten, 'Naming Practices among the Irish Secular Nobility in the High Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History* 32 (2006), 43-53: p. 44.

¹⁵⁹ Gustav Lehmacher, 'Eine Brüsseler Handschrift der *Eachtra Conaill Gulbain*' *ZCP* 14 (1923), 212-269: p. 220.

¹⁶⁰ *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ed. by Whitley Stokes (Oxford, 1890), p. 245.

¹⁶¹ *Cath Maighe Léna*, ed. by Kenneth Jackson (Dublin, 1938), p.1.

¹⁶² eDIL, s.v., 1 mes(s).

¹⁶³ Osborn Bergin and R. I. Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', *Ériu* 12 (1938), 137-196; TBDD, pp. 3-4.

with Máedóc.¹⁶⁴ I examine how monastic education and oblation related to fosterage in chapter four.

Although Culann is only referred to as foster-father, *aite*, in ‘The Conception’, and not in ‘The Boyhood Deeds’, he still has a role to play. He is the one from whom Cú Chulainn takes his famous name. Liam Breatnach has explained how the boy taking on the dog’s role is in line with legal practice, and as such need not be a fostering.¹⁶⁵ Yet there is still something educational in the presentation of Culann in ‘The Boyhood Deeds’. The hound of Culann is so treasured because it defends all the smith’s holdings. To replace the hound Cú Chulainn will raise another (*ailéibthair lim-sa*)¹⁶⁶ and until it comes of age, the boy will defend Culann’s house. Cú Chulainn takes the name of the hound and learns how to singlehandedly defend its home. This is the image of the boy in the *Táin*, standing alone at the border, defending the province of Ulster from the invasive attacks of the rest of Ireland. But in ‘The Boyhood Deeds’ and throughout the *Táin*, Culann is not his foster-father; instead, the identity of his foster-father keeps changing.

In recension one of the *Táin*, Conchobur, Conall Cernach and Fergus are referred to as his foster-fathers.¹⁶⁷ Conchobur is Cú Chulainn’s maternal uncle and this, combined with his role as fosterer, is the only thing that stays Cú Chulainn’s anger in *Aided Guill 7 Gairb*.¹⁶⁸ Conall Cernach is usually his foster-brother. The passage in which he calls Cú Chulainn his fosterling is in ‘The Boyhood Deeds’, addressing Ailill and Medb.¹⁶⁹ Finally, in ‘The Boyhood Deeds’ his destructive power is clear and fosterage is used to reconcile this power with society, whereas in the fosterage competition the boy is a passive object of the ambitions of the Ulaid. For this reason,

¹⁶⁴ *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, pp. 18-23; To this can be added the proliferation of hypocoristic names for saints, for example Mochóemóg (VSH, II, pp. 166-67).

¹⁶⁵ Liam Breatnach, ‘On the Glossing of the Early Irish Law-texts, Fragmentary Texts, and Some Aspects of the Law relating to Dogs’ in *Celtica Helsingiensia. Proceedings from a Symposium on Celtic Studies*, ed. by Anders Ahlqvist et al. (Helsinki, 1996), pp. 11-20.

¹⁶⁶ TBC LL, p. 25.

¹⁶⁷ TBC 1, pp. 140, 141, 193.

¹⁶⁸ Whitley Stokes, ‘The Violent Deaths of Goll and Garb’, *RC* 14 (1893), 396-449: p. 426-27.

¹⁶⁹ I discuss this shifting foster-brother terminology in chapter three.

'The Boyhood Deeds' presents Conchobur as his foster-father to demonstrate Cú Chulainn's loyalty to Ulster. When he first takes up his arms as a seven-year-old boy he immediately rides out to the borders of Ulster where he demonstrates his martial prowess by killing the sons of Nechta Scéne and taming wild deer and birds.¹⁷⁰ This undoubtedly positive force then threatens to turn back on the settled society of Emain Macha when he returns and Conchobur literally cools Cú Chulainn's battle-ardour, reconciling his destructive force. When the boy is finally calmed, his changed state is represented in this image: 'The boy was placed between Conchobur's knees (*dá choiss*) and the king began to stroke his hair'.¹⁷¹ When he comes from Mag Muirthemne to Emain Macha and is taken under the protection of the Ulaid it is fitting that Cú Chulainn's primary foster relationship should be with his uncle Conchobur.¹⁷² This accords with Ó Cathasaigh's idea that 'Cú Chulainn primarily functions on the interface between his community and other communities' and with the well attested role of the *níá*, which can be translated as 'champion' or 'nephew/sister's son'.¹⁷³

Cú Chulainn's fosterage, as a product of corporate upbringing by all the Ulaid, clearly informs the narrative of 'The Conception'. Yet, it is useful to remember that 'The Boyhood Deeds' do not actually depict his fosterage. In terms of his rearing, this collection of short tales begins with him in the house of his father and mother: 'Indeed, this boy was raised (*alta*) in the house of his father and mother in Airgdir in Maig Muirthemne'.¹⁷⁴ He comes to Emain Macha as a youth, capable of speech and action, so he would be in no need of nutritive fosterage, although he is still young enough to be fostered. What marks this out is the fact that his parents do not bind him to another family. Rather, he goes despite his mother's warnings and binds himself, actively, in a mutual contract with Conchobur.

¹⁷⁰ Jaski has suggested that this age is used in the adoption of the arms tale in order to begin an unusual kind of fosterage which comes to end at the *Táin*, when Cú Chulainn is seventeen. ('*Gormac and dalta*', p. 24).

¹⁷¹ TBC LL, pp. 33, 171.

¹⁷² TBC 1, p. 13-26; TBC LL, pp. 21-33.

¹⁷³ Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Sister's Son', pp. 128-160.

¹⁷⁴ TBC LL, p. 21.

The more legal framework in 'The Boyhood Deeds' brings with it a concomitant erasure of the role of women. Women had little or no legal standing and the series of tales begins with Cú Chulainn disregarding and abandoning his mother;¹⁷⁵ despite her concerns, he is big enough to traverse the wilderness of Slíab Fúait on his own.¹⁷⁶ However, it is worthwhile to point out how the transformative power of female foster-parenting can still be seen, despite the masculine, legal wrangling. The key reconciling episode has already been noted, when returning from the border Cú Chulainn nearly destroys the Ulstermen. The concluding image of the piece is of the tired young warrior resting at the knees of Conchobur and Jaski interprets it as follows: 'the knee is more often associated with fosterage, so perhaps we should regard this scene as Conchobar's formal acceptance of Cú Chulainn as his foster-son, as he was now re-integrated into society'.¹⁷⁷ This reading privileges the construction of these masculine bonds and for two of the recensions, II and III, the word that is translated as 'knees' is *cos*, which is usually rendered 'foot, leg' and not *glún*, the term charged with the sense of fosterage and the succession of generations.¹⁷⁸

This all may seem a little bit like splitting semantic hairs but it forms part of a larger picture. Cú Chulainn is described as already reared (*alta*) in the house of his mother and father so a deliberate vocabulary choice has been made. The use of a neutral word for knee, not the one most associated with fosterage, indicates that this male image is not actually pointing to fosterage. The image is not that of sitting on the knee and close, physical proximity but sitting between the feet of Conchobur, as a manifestation of the power relationship. This opens up a little space for the women in the tale. Cú Chulainn is prevented from wreaking havoc because the women of Ulster go out to him with their breasts exposed, when he hides his head he is grabbed and thrown into vats of cold water to cool his fury. This has previously been interpreted as

¹⁷⁵ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Women and the Law in Early Ireland' in *Chattel, Servant, or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State, and Society* ed. By M. O'Dowd and S. Wichert (Belfast, 1995), pp. 45-57.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Jaski, 'Gormac and *dalta*', pp. 23-24.

¹⁷⁸ Loth, 'Le mot désignant le genou', p. 147.

indicative of Cú Chulainn's youth, that he is easily embarrassed, or as a symbolic triumph of settled society as represented by femininity.¹⁷⁹

I would argue that settled society is represented by fosterage, or at the least wet-nursing imagery, since the women bare their breasts: 'the woman troop of Emain went out towards him ... and they bared their breasts (*a m-bruinni*) to him'.¹⁸⁰ At this Cú Chulainn hides his face and this gives the Ulaid a chance to throw him in cold water and cool his indiscriminate battle-fury. Here, the wild, extra-social, masculine, destructive power represented by Cú Chulainn is contrasted with the calm, social influence brought about through the women of Ulster, coming out of the fort with their breasts exposed. This civilising agency of the breast, how it makes human and normal that which is terrifying and non-human, is seen in the way Cú Chulainn is brought into Ulster society through the agency of Dechtire in 'The Conception'.¹⁸¹ It is interesting to note that the one recension that uses the foster laden term, *glún*, in the final image of reconciliation is the same recension that describes the women of Ulster as entirely naked.¹⁸² Presenting the women as entirely naked makes Cú Chulainn's reaction one of sexual shame rather than a response to their breasts and what they represent; the foster imagery is then moved to Conchobur.

The shifting fosterage language analysed above demonstrates the difficulty medieval Irish authors had in conceptualising Cú Chulainn's relations with the men of Ulster. He is a young boy, acting like a warrior, taking on the role of a man. The already complicated language of fealty and loyalty, for him is transformed by the language and actions that represent such relationships in fosterage. In this way we see fostering language is employed but in a way that cuts out women, since at this stage in his life Cú Chulainn no longer needs the physical, nurturing presence of a maternal figure. This contrasts with the way in which he is presented in 'The Feast'. The contest surrounding his fosterage is still centred on the masculine world: it is between men,

¹⁷⁹ Raymond J. Cormier, 'Pagan Shame or Christian Modesty', *Celtica* 14 (1981), 43-46: p. 46.

¹⁸⁰ TBC 1, p. 25.

¹⁸¹ CCC, p. 4.

¹⁸² TBC 1, p. 25.

displaying traditionally masculine traits. Yet throughout his conception tale the boy is always in the company of a woman and he is shown on Finnchóem's breast.

Similar difficulties are seen throughout the *Táin*. As expected from the Book of Leinster redactor, the picture of fosterage in recension two is the most coherent. Cú Chulainn's many foster-brothers fight for the Connacht army. Scáthach is most consistently referred to as his foster-mother. It is Fergus mac Roich who is most consistently cast in the role of foster-father.¹⁸³ In the *Táin* Cú Chulainn is not being fostered, rather the ties are pre-existing and invoked retrospectively. Since we have moved beyond the period of education the role of the foster-father is different. Fergus and Cú Chulainn also agree not to fight one another because of this bond. This, bloodlessly, resolves the dilemma posed by Cú Chulainn's more bellicose foster-brothers. Such is the affection that Fergus feels towards his fosterling, the prospect of fighting is never raised. When Cú Chulainn points out that Fergus has come to the fight with no sword, he replies: 'I care not at all, my fosterling', said Fergus, 'for even if there were a sword in it, it would not reach you and would not be wielded against you'.¹⁸⁴ Fergus usually acts to help his fosterling. He delays the opposing army by leading them through rough ways. Indeed, when he comes to converse with Cú Chulainn he deliberately makes his stay brief 'lest the men of Ireland should say that Fergus was betraying them to his fosterling (*dalta*)'.¹⁸⁵ The protection offered by a foster-father is also seen in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, The Pursuit of Diarmait and Gráinne, a tale of the Finn Cycle known in the fourteenth and possibly thirteenth century.¹⁸⁶ In many episodes throughout the flight Diarmait's foster-father Aonghus aids his fosterling and hinders the pursuing Finn.

Foster-fathers often act in the best interest of their fosterlings, even after the period of fosterage is over. Such care emerges in the Ulster Cycle after Conchobur's death. In two tales in which the Ulstermen try to decide who should succeed, Conall

¹⁸³ TBC LL, pp. 157, 173, 183, 184, 186, 207, 208, 213, 269.

¹⁸⁴ TBC LL, p. 208.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, pp. 44, 183.

¹⁸⁶ *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* ed. by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha (Dublin, 1967) p. xiv.

Cernach advocates for his fosterling, Cuscraid Mend. In *Togail Bruidne Da Choca*, a tale dated to the twelfth century, he seeks the kingship for his fosterling.¹⁸⁷ He even, in a later recension, reproaches Cuscraid for not giving battle.¹⁸⁸ Conall's desire is not frustrated in *Cath Airtig*, set after the disaster of the previous tale. Although the men of Ulster want to give the kingship to Conall, he refuses; 'I will not take it, but give it to my fosterling, namely, Cuscraid the Stammerer of Macha, for he has surpassed my vigour and my skill of hand'.¹⁸⁹ Before the kingship is handed over he gives advice to the young prince. This trope of the advice of the foster-father is something that Cú Chulainn, himself, indulges in. Lugaid Réoderg appears as Cú Chulainn's foster-son in several texts. There is a passage in *Serglige Con Culainn* 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn' in which Cú Chulainn passes on wisdom to his fosterling.¹⁹⁰ While the wisdom text itself is generic it is interesting to note the roles given.

The *Serglige* also contains a touching image that unites all generations of Cú Chulainn's foster-family. When he is first struck down, Cú Chulainn is taken to bed. He lies there from one Samhain to another and around him in the house are 'Fergus by the wall, Conall Cernach by the bedrail, Lugaid Réoderg by the pillow, and Ethne Ingubai by his feet'.¹⁹¹ Although it is not mentioned in this passage, elsewhere in the tale the foster relationships are made explicit. So it is fitting that those who stand around the sick hero are, respectively, his foster-father, foster-brother, fosterling, and his wife.¹⁹² Finally, in *Aided Derbforgaill* Cú Chulainn acts to broker a marriage for his fosterling, Lugaid. When the titular *Derbforgaill* comes to Ireland, it is to wed Cú Chulainn. He turns her down but says: 'Indeed, I would like ... you to go with the noblest man in Ireland, that is, Lugaid of the Red Stripes'.¹⁹³ Once more, we see

¹⁸⁷ *Bruiden Da Choca*, ed. and trans. by Gregory Toner (London, 2007), pp. 3, 104-05.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 224-25.

¹⁸⁹ R. I. Best, 'The Battle of Airtech', *Ériu* 8 (1916), 170-190: p. 179.

¹⁹⁰ *Serglige Con Culainn*, ed. by Myles Dillon (Dublin, 1953) pp. 9-11.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁹² In the opening to *Serglige* Cú Chulainn's wife is called Ethne, whereas in every other tale in the Ulster cycle she is Emer. When the tale resumes, after the *Briathartecos*, Emer is the name used for his wife.

¹⁹³ 'Aided Derbforgaill: The Violent Death of Derbforgaill', ed. and trans. Kicki Ingridsdotter (unpublished doctoral thesis, Uppsala University, 2009), p. 83.

fosterlings held in high regard by their foster-father. The aid that the foster-father gives in setting up their fosterling for life is not just restricted to gaining land but gaining a wife. Foster-mothers can also do this, as in the tale of C  l Cr  dae C  tguinech, who learns the poem to woo his love from his foster-mother, Muirenn.¹⁹⁴ This trope is turned on its head when   engus helps his foster-father Midir to woo his love in *Tochmarc   ta  ne*, ‘The Wooing of   ta  n’.¹⁹⁵

In the foregoing discussion, we have seen some of the many narratives of C   Chulainn’s fosterage. While they provide an array of other foster-fathers, each tale shows one foster-father taking on the main responsibility. A character as written about as C   Chulainn will under-go many rewrites and reframings, including reframing his foster-family. Yet, each tale must be taken as its own production. It would be wrong to read these all side-by-side as affirming a tradition of multiple fosterage. He was not fostered by Conchobur *and* Culann *and* Fergus, but they are all options for the role of his foster-father. Such a role is one framed in affection and education, continuing throughout their lives, and both bound in an image of physicality.

1.4. Who Teaches? A Comparison of Finn and C   Chulainn

It has been remarked before how similar the early lives of Finn mac Cumail and C   Chulainn are.¹⁹⁶ They are the only two characters in medieval Irish literature to have ‘Boyhood Deeds’ and they did not start life as C   Chulainn and Finn.¹⁹⁷ Finn is renamed twice in his boyhood deeds both times from Demne to Finn, firstly in his absence by the chief of the stronghold of Mag Life and secondly by Finn  cis —Finn

¹⁹⁴ AnS, pp. 21-2.

¹⁹⁵ Bergin and Best, ‘Tochmarc   ta  ne’, p. 149.

¹⁹⁶ Joseph F. Nagy, ‘Heroic Destinies in the *Macgn  mrada* of Finn and C   Chulainn’, *ZCP* 40 (1984), 23-39.

¹⁹⁷ Although Elizabeth Boyle has commented on the similarities between the *macgn  mrada* and the Irish life of David (Kuno Meyer and Julius Pokorny, ‘Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften: David und Goliath’, *ZCP* 13 (1921), 175-76) this text does not use the term *macgn  mrada* and its interaction with the boyhood deed genre is based on how it references the prior model of C   Chulainn’s Boyhood Deeds.

the poet. The first renaming episode is similar to Cú Chulainn's first time in Emain Macha. In the second renaming Demne has gone to Finnécis to learn poetry on the banks of the Boyne. After the boy accidentally eats the salmon of knowledge, and thereby fulfils a prophecy, Finnécis gives Demne his name, Finn.¹⁹⁸ This narrative is similar to Cú Chulainn's in the way the craftsman passes on his name to his young charge. Where Nagy sees differences between the two narratives of upbringing, I am going to suggest that his reading only works in part for 'The Boyhood Deeds', and that Finn and Cú Chulainn's early education are quite similar.

The work done by Nagy sees the upbringing of Cú Chulainn performed by the Ulaid as a body as prefiguring, or representing, the way in which he will come to defend the province.¹⁹⁹ This work is drawing on Sjoestedt and her idea that Cú Chulainn represents the exemplary *héros de la tribu*, the protector and embodiment of settled society.²⁰⁰ Cú Chulainn single-handedly defends Ulster through the action of the *Táin* in a clear display of this aspect of the warrior's role. Nagy points out that the uncontrolled power that resides in Cú Chulainn is put to society's good through the way he is raised: 'two important cultural institutions become the primary moulding forces in his life: fosterage and the warrior *Männerbund* ... the rowdy youth who disrupted the play of both the boy troop and the king is "tamed" by his fosterers; his energy goes occasionally unchecked but is channelled into social causes (the defence of the province, or his fosterers) and social activities (the various arts which his fosterers teach him)'.²⁰¹ Whereas the moulding force of fosterage is seen in 'The Boyhood Deeds', on which Nagy bases his analysis, such force is not realised in 'The Feast'. Once more we are faced with the tension between individual tales and the meta-text of the Ulster Cycle. Nagy sees Finn as the hero outside the tribe whose education is more important than directing his wild excesses.

¹⁹⁸ Kuno Meyer, 'Macgnímartha Find', *RC* 5 (1881), 195-204: p. 201.

¹⁹⁹ Nagy, 'Heroic Destinies', pp. 23-39.

²⁰⁰ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Dieux et héros des Celtes* (Paris, 1940), pp. 79-121.

²⁰¹ Nagy, 'Heroic Destinies', p. 28.

I suggest this difference between Finn and Cú Chulainn— one brought up by mystical individuals and the other by society at large—is not so marked. Nagy makes much of the role of the female *fíán* members in raising Finn.²⁰² They are Fíaccail mac Concinn, the poet, and Bodbmall and Líath Luachra, female warriors and druids. They are troublesome characters, in the eyes of settled society as they are *fíán*, female warriors and druids. They are not the only ambivalent fosterers that Finn has, as he goes on to stay with another *fíán* band and *áes cearda*.²⁰³ This latter is often translated as poets, which accords with Finn's later education with Finnécis and with the liminal status of these individuals. The association of magical properties and fosterage is not limited to Finn. To give one example, Fuamnach the female antagonist in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, 'The Wooing of Étaín', learns her magic from her foster-father.²⁰⁴ Magic is a learnt skill, one passed down through fosterage. In the same way, Cú Chulainn's *gae bulga* is an irresistible attack taught to him by Scáthach.

It would seem, at first glance, that Finn's fosterers contrast with Culann the smith, who is situated at the heart of the society as a craftsman. However, in 'The Conception' Culann is just referred to as a *cerd*, and it is not made clear if we are to assume that he is a smith or a poet in this tale. This is differentiated from 'The Boyhood Deeds', which explicitly refers to him as a smith: 'He [Culann] told him [Conchobur] to come with only a small number unless he could bring a few genuine guests, for he had neither lands nor territory but only his sledge-hammers and his anvils and his fists and his tongs'.²⁰⁵ So in 'The Boyhood Deeds' Culann is not called the foster-father and his position in society is reinforced. But even here the location of his dwelling is positioned away from Emain Macha, the symbolic heart of Ulster. Necessary distance is represented by Cú Chulainn and Conchobur's journey to Culann's house and, in TBC LL, the isolated position is made clear when he comments on the effectiveness of his hound: 'When [the dog's] chain is taken off no traveller or wayfarer dares come into

²⁰² Ibid, p. 29.

²⁰³ Meyer, 'Macgnimratha Find', p. 199.

²⁰⁴ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', pp. 152-53.

²⁰⁵ TBC LL, p. 23.

the same canton (*óentríchait*) as he'.²⁰⁶ This area of land cannot then be included in Conchobur's lands since they fall outside the protection of the hound. In 'The Conception' Culann is left a more ambiguous fosterer, similar to the liminal characters in Finn's upbringing.

In 'The Feast' Sencha describes himself as a fit fosterer because he is a *flan* warrior and he highlights those traits. He emphasises his battle prowess, speed, and his poetry. The analogy of a deer that he uses to describe his speed is particularly reminiscent of the *flan*. However, Cú Chulainn also has a parallel to the female *flan* in his upbringing, the warrior woman Scáthach who educates him in Alba. This is a figure associated with Cú Chulainn from our earliest literature but her role in Cú Chulainn's life is most clearly expressed in 'The Wooing', *Foghlaim Con Chulainn* and in some references in the *Táin*.²⁰⁷ Nagy himself notes this *flan* element as a link between the two heroes but sees it as part of the necessary life stage of leaving society to join the youths of the *flan*. 'In the lives of both Cú Chulainn and Finn, this bizarre female fosterage beyond society is intimately linked to the experience of being a member of an extra-social *Männerbund*, a *flan*'.²⁰⁸ However, Nagy has not examined the reason a female warrior is used for this purpose.

The previous readings of Cú Chulainn's sojourn with Scáthach in Alba have been preoccupied with mythological interpretations of the episode.²⁰⁹ The broad mythological framework, places Scáthach in the role of Otherworldly goddess. The broad plot points of such a narrative are as follows: the hero makes a perilous journey to the ill-defined Otherworld, where he meets a goddess or fairy. She sleeps with the hero, symbolizing his acceptance by the supernatural forces that govern our world and he returns to the human realm wiser and more capable of performing his role as a hero.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 24, 161.

²⁰⁷ CCC, pp. 16-68; Whitley Stokes, 'The Training of Cú Chulainn', *RC* 29 (1908), 109-147; TBC 1, pp. 12, 54, 88, 93; TBC LL, pp. 71, 81-85, 89-90, 95, 97-99; Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Oileamhain Con Cualinn: Cú Chulainn's Training', *Emania* 19 (2002), 43-52.

²⁰⁸ Nagy, 'Heroic destinies', p. 31.

²⁰⁹ William Sayers, 'Extraordinary Weapons, Heroic Ethics, and Royal Justice in Early Irish Literature', *Preternature* 2 (2013), 1-18.

That is, to be the means of communication between gods and men, vital to the divine and human realms but not completely forming part of either.²¹⁰

This is a tempting way to approach the text, but we are not dealing with gods and fertility rites — the text is a conscious composition of the eleventh century. Scáthach is performing the role of a foster-mother, since, although it is nowhere made explicit, her actions are those of a foster-mother. She takes on the role of the secondary, educational fosterer when she dispenses specialised knowledge. For the other Ulster heroes, she just instructs them in battle-craft, whereas for Cú Chulainn she passes on the *gae bolga*.²¹¹ Educative fosterage would have been a readily accessible way for a contemporary audience to understand this further education, especially given Cú Chulainn's precociously young age. He is supposed to be seven at this point — in some sources the age at which fosterage should begin.²¹² The other Ulster boys are called the *daltai Scáthaige*, the fosterlings of Scáthach, so an education is being handed down at her fort. Cú Chulainn fights alongside Scáthach's sons in the running battles with Aífe in a manner reminiscent of how foster-brothers are supposed to support one another in war.²¹³ In terms of the narrative structure, this group faces off against the three sons of Ilsúanach and on the next day the three sons of Esse Enchinde, which places Cú Chulainn in a unit with the sons of Scáthach. They form a whole linked by fosterage.

Scáthach is providing educational fosterage but the fact she is a woman and not a foster-father moves it from the normative, possibly adding a nutritive element. For Finn the nutritive element is clear: his mother gives birth to him and immediately gives him away, 'for his mother dared not let him be with her'.²¹⁴ The nutritive element comes out differently in Cú Chulainn's case. The image of normative, educative

²¹⁰ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (Dublin, 1977), p. 7.

²¹¹ There are a number of different interpretations of this phrase, the most common being "lightning spear". Whatever the etymology it is always thought of as the ultimate heroic feat, used to overcome any opponent, and only known by Cú Chulainn.

²¹² CIH, 1759.6-1770.14.

²¹³ CCC, p. 54.

²¹⁴ Meyer, 'Macgnímratha Find', p. 198.

fosterage is subverted in the narrative surrounding the commencement of his education:

'Dobert iarom in ingen comairli do Choin Chulainn dis tres laí, má bu do dénum láechdachta doluid, ara téised dochum Scáthaige co magin i mbaí oc forcetal a dá mac .i. Cuar 7 Cett, arin corad ích n-erred de isin iburdross mór i mbaísi fóen and. Conid fuirmed etir a dá chích cona chlaidiub co tartad a thrí hindroisc dó .i. a forcetal cen díchell 7 a hernaidmsi co n-ícc tindscrae 7 eperit fris nech aridmbaí, ar ba fáithsi'

'On the third day [Uathach, Scáthach's daughter] advised Cu Chulainn, that if he had come to achieve valour, he should go through the hero's salmon-leap to Scáthach, where she was teaching her two sons, Cuar and Cett, in the great yew tree, when she was there; that he should then set his sword between her two breasts until she gave him his three wishes: to teach him without neglect, and that he might wed her (Uathach) without the payment of the wedding gift, and to tell him what would befall him; for she was a prophetess.'²¹⁵

In this way Scáthach's breasts are linked with the education that she gives Cú Chulainn. It is through approaching her breasts that he secures his singular education. As a female warrior she can unite the two models of fosterage, the nutritive and the educative. This is the positive side of the paradoxical figure of the female-warrior in Irish literature: she does not, like her Classical counterparts, cast aside her reproductive femininity. Scáthach has at least three biological children. Her maternal aspect is played on in this passage as she is teaching her sons when Cú Chulainn interrupts claiming his education. Scáthach does not breastfeed Cú Chulainn, so my reading may over-play the nutritive aspect, but her breasts cannot be ignored in the heavily embodied language surrounding fosterage. It must be noted that he is the only pupil to whom she teaches the *gae bulga*.

However, this nurturing image is not the only reading to be placed on this scene. As with so much of the material around Cú Chulainn, while he is fulfilling the expected societal role, he also goes beyond it and challenges it. The breaking of propriety here is in the sexualised nature of the imagery. Brandishing his sword over the breasts of Scáthach is a thinly disguised sexual image and the text itself points to a variation of this story in which the meeting culminates with them sleeping together:

²¹⁵ CCC, pp. 51-52.

'It is here that other authorities relate that Cú Chulainn took Scáthach with him to the strand and slept with her there ... But we do not relate that story here'.²¹⁶ The text distances itself from the overt sexual reading but in so doing highlights the sexual threat behind Cú Chulainn's actions. Cú Chulainn's sexual extravagances in his time away from Emer have been noted before, betokening a patriarchal society in which male chastity is of no consequence and shameful actions that take place without the knowledge of society at large are not shameful at all.²¹⁷ Yet there is more to his relationship with Scáthach that is disturbing. The fact that she is his foster-mother lends the sex a more threatening and disruptive air. The metonymy of the breast, as secondary sexual characteristic but also marker of nurturing motherhood, works on this tension.²¹⁸ The negative consequences of Cú Chulainn's transgressive action then follow: the prophecy Scáthach gives is of his death and the destruction caused in the *Táin*, and he uses the technique she teaches to kill his foster-brother.²¹⁹

If the fosterage of Cú Chulainn is more similar to that of Finn, then one need not subscribe to the view that Cú Chulainn's character needs to be brought up by many people simultaneously. In these texts he is not an avatar of society, but partakes of a heroic fosterage like Finn. In 'The Boyhood Deeds' Cú Chulainn's nurturing has taken place in Mag Muirthemne at the house of his mother and father—a father who is arguably a foster-father if Lug's claim to paternity in TBC 1 be believed.²²⁰ Thereafter his relationship with all the Ulstermen is less clearly framed as fostering and the main foster relationship in the tale is that between him and Fergus.²²¹ In 'The Conception' this initial rearing is taken on by Culann, who gives the boy a new nickname following the tradition of fosterers. In other descriptions of Cú Chulainn's later life the multiple

²¹⁶ Ibid, p. 52.

²¹⁷ Philip O'Leary, 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', *Ériu* 38 (1987), 27-44.

²¹⁸ It must be remembered that a medieval audience would not have placed as much sexual focus on the breast as modern audiences do. The sexuality of the body in the medieval period is famously debated by Bynum and Steinberg. Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd edn. (Chicago, 1996), pp. 190-92; Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg', *Renaissance Quarterly* 39 (1986), 399-439.

²¹⁹ CCC, pp. 57-60.

²²⁰ TBC 1, p. 65.

²²¹ TBC LL, pp. 43, 132.

fosterage is taken on by Scáthach, the warrior-woman. She works as an educator but the fact that she is woman and a mother adds a possible nurturing element. Regardless, Scáthach is not part of a great number of people simultaneously fostering a child, but rather the fosterling is given special education by a secondary fosterer.

1.5. Multiple Fosterage: The Evidence from Other Sources

Aside from Cú Chulainn, other narratives have been read as evidence for widespread multiple fosterage. They present a version of multiple fosterage that accords with the one discussed in the section above. The pattern is one of one or two families, fostering consecutively, and a deep emotional bond is created between the fosterling and one of the foster-families. I will suggest in this section that the multiple fosterage narratives are more unusual, and having a single foster-family is more common than even the restricted multiple fosterage. We have seen how a whole people can be described as fostering an individual. Cú Chulainn is called the ‘fosterling of the Ulstermen’ by Fer Diad, and something similar happens in *De maccaib Conaire*.²²² These may be metaphors for the affection a whole people feels towards their favoured son – just as the phrase “favoured son” does not imply a biological connection. Yet, there are cases where smaller, more manageable numbers of fosterers are named and it is to these I will turn now.

I shall begin with Conaire in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’. When Mess Buachalla comes to marry the king, she comes with her fosterers. This is not unusual as fosterers can be involved in the marriage prospects of their charges, a duty of care that extends beyond the period of fosterage. When she gives birth to a son, she asks for three wishes (*drindrosci*), that Conaire should have three sets of fosterers: ‘na h-aiti rosn-altadar 7 na dá Maine Milscothacha 7 ata-comnaicsi fa-deisin’ ‘the foster-fathers who reared her, the two Maine Milscothachs

²²² TBC 1, p. 86, 202; Gwynn, ‘De maccaib Conaire’, p. 149.

and she herself'.²²³ Furthermore, the three sons of Dond Désa are reared alongside Conaire. I will address his foster-brothers in a later chapter. What is immediately striking is that these are special requests; multiple fosterage is clearly out of the ordinary. The first set shows the high regard in which Mess Buachalla holds her own fosterers. Not only are they ennobled after she is betrothed to the king, but they are further entwined in the life of his successor. The two Maines rapidly fall out of the tale, but their sweet-tongued nature (*milscothach*) could mean that they are there to teach the boy eloquence. Finally, it is striking that she names herself as a nurse for her own child. Keeping your child at your own breast is seen as an unusual act, as inferred from the *Vita S. Columbani* in which Columbanus' mother is praised for going against custom.²²⁴ Mess Buachalla's actions here, are consonant with Bitel's view that mothers controlled fosterage for their own ends.²²⁵ Yet, clearly the multiple nature of this fosterage is unusual.

Lug, one of the supposed fathers of Cú Chulainn, also combines multiple foster-fathers and the possession of every skill. He gains access to the court at Tara by possessing every skill, *samildánach*. When the final battle between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomoiré begins, the Túatha Dé are afraid for Lug's safety and set his nine foster-fathers (*a noí n-oide*) to guard him.²²⁶ This appears to confirm the model of multiple fosterage seen in 'The Feast': in order to possess every skill and be the paragon of his people, the hero has to have been fostered by many. Indeed, it is because of his many skills that the Túatha Dé are said to fear his death. Although there is a connection between skills and foster-fathers implied by their juxtaposition in this passage, we cannot take this statement at face value. Earlier in the narrative, when Lug gains entry to Tara, having returned from overseas, he is identified as: 'He is the foster-son (*dalta*)

²²³ TBDD, p. 4.

²²⁴ *Vita Sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, ed. by Bruno Krusch, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum (Hanover and Leipzig, 1905), p. 154; see Elva Johnston, 'Movers and Shakers? How women shaped the career of Columbanus', in *Columbanus and the Peoples of Post-Roman Europe*, ed. A. O'Hara (Oxford, 2017 [in print]).

²²⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 97.

²²⁶ *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. Gray, pp. 50-1.

of Taittiu the daughter of Magmór, the king of Spain, and of Eochaid Garb mac Dúach'.²²⁷ This is a more usual paradigm of fosterage. A whole foster-family is provided, geographically distant from Lug's home. When he returns, he gains access to his home by demonstrating all his skills, skills he has presumably learned in his time away. Finally, the nine "foster-fathers" appear later in the battle as "companions", *céili*, when Lug slips away from them.²²⁸ Are these guards originally called foster-fathers because of the duty of care they have for Lug? Is it because skills and care are placed side-by-side when they enter the narrative? In either case, I suggest that the nine foster-fathers are guards with a metaphoric fostering role. Once more we must always be careful when analysing these examples of multiple fosterage.

The other most commonly cited example of multiple fosterage and its connection to high status is found in Tírechán's *Collectanea*.²²⁹ This passage is used by Charles-Edwards, Jaski, and Kelly, to uphold common multiple fosterage.²³⁰ This is one of the two earliest "Lives" of Patrick we have, the other being Muirchú's *Vita Sancti Patricii*, which was composed in the seventh century.²³¹ Tírechán's text only survives in one copy in The Book of Armagh, a ninth-century manuscript, though it was probably first composed around the same time as Muirchú's.²³² The *Collectanea* is not a saint's life as such, since it does not follow a typical biography, but is rather an itinerary of Ireland in which Patrick performs miracles all over the country. The reference to multiple fosterage is not so readily intelligible since it is made in relation to Jesus. As with much of the discussion around Jesus, there is a fine line to tread between literal and metaphorical interpretations of the reference. I shall draw out, more fully, the metaphorical one, which subtly alters our view of the literal.

²²⁷ Ibid, pp. 38-9.

²²⁸ Ibid, pp. 58-9.

²²⁹ *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, ed. by Ludwig Bieler (Dublin, 1979), pp. 142-4.

²³⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 79; Jaski, 'Gormac and *dalta*', p. 25; Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 90.

²³¹ *Patrician Texts*, ed. Bieler, p. 1, 41-2.

²³² Eoin MacNeill, 'Dates of Texts in the Book of Armagh Relating to St Patrick', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 58 (1928), 85-101.

The relevant passage comes when Patrick is converting the daughters of Lóegaire, his most vocal adversary and a recalcitrant promoter of the old faith. One of the girls decides to ask Patrick some probing questions about the nature of God:

Quis est deus et ubi est deus et cuius est deus et ubi habitaculum eius? Si habet filios et filias, aurum et argentum deus vester? Si vivus semper, si pulcher, si filium eius nutrierunt multi, si filiae eius carae et pulchrae sunt hominibus mundi? In caelo an in terra est, in aequore, in fluminibus, in montanis, in convallibus? Dic nobis notitiam eius, quomodo videbitur, quomodo delegitur, quomodo invenitur, si in iuventute, si in senectute invenitur'.²³³

The traditional reading of this passage is that coming in the list of the questions about the noble status of God, amidst the gold and silver, the beauty and fecundity – traditional attributes expected of a secular lord – multiple fosterage forms part of the image of the great noble. Just as access to great wealth singles out a noble, so too does the fact that many people foster his son. However, I suggest this reading focuses too much on the power structures and misses the emotional element in fosterage.

The continued conversation between Patrick and the maidens has been read as Tírechán placing the creed into the mouths of the pagans. Patrick asks them a series of questions to which they reply 'Credimus'.²³⁴ The passage, then, is an interesting juxtaposition of wrong and right. The pagans, who know nothing of the Christian religion, ask questions that would sound nonsensical to a churchman: where does God live and is he a young or old man? Yet scattered within this are truths about the nature of God. It is through this tension, between the maidens' social expectations of what a powerful god would look like and the nature of the divine, that we can approach multiple fosterage.

When we examine the list of attributes in which the multiple fosterage comes, we can reassess the reading of the passage that reinforces the model of common, widespread multiple fosterage. While, on the face of it, the list seems congruent with a secular lord's traits the phrase 'si vivus semper' points to unearthly characteristics and

²³³ *The Patrician Texts*, ed. Bieler, p. 142.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 144.

leads us to view the other traits in this light. The beauty, gold and silver can refer to the heavenly splendour and metaphorical rewards of virtuousness. The 'filiae eius' passage is harder to interpret but does refer to the girls themselves. They are about to become nuns, yet their secular concerns are still in evidence. They care what their standing in the world will be if they turn their backs on their natural father, the pagan, and become daughters of God. The reference to daughters of kings becoming nuns under Patrick's tutelage is seen in the saint's own writing. In his *Confessio* he states: 'nuper facta est plebs Domini et filii Dei nuncupantur, filii Scottorum et filiae regulorum monachi et virgines Christi esse videntur'.²³⁵ This part of the *Confessio* survives in the abridged version as recorded in the Book of Armagh, so it seems likely that Tírechán would have been aware of the reference. The girls play on the tension between revealed truth and secular concerns; in transitioning from daughters of secular power to those of Christ they are concerned about being thought dear and beautiful. They will be, but in the eyes of God, not the men of the world.

Finally, we turn to 'si filium eius nutrierunt multi', the clause used to justify the prevalence of multiple fosterage. The statement is not merely a reflection of the expected social order but a revealed truth about the widespread nature of Christian belief. Jesus, the son of God, has been taken into many homes by many people and in that sense has been fostered by many. Taking in Christ is a common enough metaphor but rises in popularity sometime after the eighth century. In Ireland, possibly as a consequence of the popularity of fosterage, this image is attested at a much earlier time and the *Collectanea* itself was written in the seventh century. The institution of fosterage, as I shall demonstrate in the later chapters, was readily adopted by the Irish church as a metaphor for the creation of spiritual kinship that lay at the heart of the Christian mission. One of the most famous poems in Old Irish, the language used from the seventh to the ninth century, is *Ísucán*.²³⁶ Here the speaker imagines fostering the infant Jesus, clutching him to their breast and cuddling him in their lap. In the twelfth

²³⁵ *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi: Introduction, Text and Commentary*, ed. by Ludwig Bieler, 2 vols (Dublin, 1950) II, p. 81.

²³⁶ E. G. Quin, 'The Early Irish Poem *Ísucán*', *CMCS* 1 (1981), 39-52.

century this poem was associated with Íte, the so-called foster-mother of saints. Given this evidence it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the idea of fostering Jesus as a metaphor for Christian faith is being played upon by the girls in Tírechán's narrative.

The girls' question could just be read literally. Indeed, for the metaphor posited above to have any weight, it must have a valid referent. But what is being referred to here is not many fosterers gathered to increase the prestige of the family who are giving their child away, but to the emotional connections that are made between the foster-child and its foster-family. The connections may be to more than one family but it does not approach the numbers we saw in Cú Chulainn's fosterage. Such a reading arises from considering the emotional as well as the political force of the girls' speech. A more emotional note has been added to the image of God as an all-powerful secular ruler. The girls should not merely enter into a relationship of submission with God as a powerful and wealthy ruler but in a relationship framed by the emotional expectations of fosterage. The affective aspect of multiple fosterage is often overlooked in favour of narratives of power and prestige. Emotional connections are forged within multiple fosterage, as seen in our analysis of Cú Chulainn's narratives and, most notably, in *Echtra Conaill Gulbain*.

Echtra Conaill Gulbain, or 'The Adventures of Conall Gulban' is a Middle Irish tale detailing the birth and youth of Conall, the son of Níall of the Nine Hostages, high king of Ireland. The text culminates in Conall's vengeful invasion of Ulster in recompense for the killing of his foster-father. The political motives lying behind this story, addressing as it does the movement of the Uí Néill ancestors, Conall and Éogan, into the north, has not been much studied in recent years. Dobbs and MacAirt have dated the tale to the eleventh or twelfth century.²³⁷ More recently Tomás Ó Canann has suggested that it should be given a thirteenth-century date, specifically composed

²³⁷ Margaret E. Dobbs and Seán Mac Airt, 'Conall of Tír Conaill', *Donegal Annual* 3 (1957), 25-65: p. 27.

under the auspices of Domnall Óg Ó Domhnaill in 1281, towards the end of his life.²³⁸ This close connection with the political desires of the Ó Domhnalls will alter any reading of the text.

The story of Conall Gulbain begins with his father, Niall of the Nine Hostages, who has recently taken a second wife after his first has passed away. At that time conflict arose between Niall and Eochaid, king of the Leinstermen, so that Indiu, the pregnant second wife, is sent away to her father's house for safe-keeping. There she gives birth to triplets, Conall, Eógan and their sister Luchra. After peace has been re-established, Fiachra, the half-brother of Niall, comes to Niall to ask to take one of his children in fosterage. Conall stands out among the other children and is immediately taken away by his uncle and cousin. He does not remain with them long, as Muiredach the king of the Calraige Mór comes to Fiachra to ask to take the boy into fosterage, where he teaches Conall a long list of wonderful skills. It is from Muiredach's house near Benn Gulban that he gains his epithet. It is from this story Jaski posits the existence of the *ardoide*, and the *frithoide*.²³⁹ In his analysis the first fosterer, the *ardoide*, has the power to appoint special, sub-fosterers, the *frithoide*. The two terms are explained in the laws in the *Díre* tract, alongside the discussion of the different compensation as mentioned in the introduction. In our tale, Fiachra, is the *ardoide* and Muiredach the *frithoide*.

Although the relationships between Conall and Fiachra, and Conall and Muiredach are framed using these specialised terms they are still working as a single fosterage would, certainly in the case of Muiredach and Conall. The foster-father takes the boy in, he raises him and teaches him wonderful swiftness. When Muiredach is killed the payment demanded by Conall is exorbitant and repeated reference is made to his overwhelming grief: 'Dála Conaill immurghu do-thúaircc, ocus ro-búail a bhasa, ocus do-hiacht co hard acaoínteach ocus at-bert "Do-biur mo chubhais ámh", ar se, "gurab mairg damh i mbethaidh a haithli in ro-imbirsiut Ulaidh"' 'As for Conall he

²³⁸ Tomás Ó Canann, 'Máel Coba Ua Gallchobair and His Early Family Background', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 134 (2004), 33-79: p. 57.

²³⁹ Jaski, 'Gormac and *dalta*', p. 25. These terms include the element for foster-father, *oide*.

pressed his hands together and sighed loudly and woefully and said "Truly, upon my oath", he said, "it pains me to continue living after that which the people of Ulaid have done".²⁴⁰ The keening, *acaóinteach*, is a powerful expression of grief and has been associated with foster-mothers in other contexts; I shall explore this aspect of foster-motherhood in another chapter.²⁴¹ The young boy is altered on a personal level by this fosterage, in his name, in his body as he learns to run so fast, and in this motivation. Their close connection is the motivating force behind the action of the tale, Conall's unassuageable grief drives the invasion.

The connection with Muiredach can be contrasted with the relationship between Conall and his *ardoide* Fiachra. This latter reinforces his foster-son's claim in the court of Niall, but the relationship is presented in a legal register at this point. They are not joined emotionally as Conall and Muiredach were. Foster relationships function on an emotive level but within the context of multiple fosterage, this close relationship is only seen as working between one of the pairs. Such a view seems to conform to common sense, that it is the proximity and time spent with each other that makes the foster relationship close. This reading holds for Cú Chulainn as, in the tales concerning him, there is one foster-father who appears particularly close, functioning almost as the sole fosterer. That this person seems to change for each tale makes the easy identification of a foster-father difficult. The closest and most often used character is that of Fergus, as he is the principal fosterer in the *Táin*,²⁴² the foster-brother relationship with Conall Cernach is emphasised in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemne*,²⁴³ Conchobur is seen as the principal fosterer in the *macgnímrada*.²⁴⁴ Once more Cú Chulainn is seen conforming to normal expectations but in an excessive and overblown manner.

²⁴⁰ Lehmacher, 'Eachtra Conaill Gulbain', p. 221.

²⁴¹ Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Sister's Son', p. 128.

²⁴² TBC LL, pp. 43, 132.

²⁴³ *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, p. 44.

²⁴⁴ TBC 1, pp. 13-26; TBC LL, pp. 21-33.

1.6. Conclusion

The topic of foster-fatherhood in medieval Ireland is incredibly broad. In attempting to recreate the emotional ties that were created between a foster-father and his fosterlings, I have had to narrow my focus somewhat but all the conclusions reached in this chapter should be viewed under the umbrella of the emotional ties of foster fatherhood. In narrowing my focus to Cú Chulainn and multiple fosterage I have answered one question directly and many more obliquely.

In the first instance, I have chosen to question the ubiquity of multiple fosterage. Our texts do not present us with many examples of multiple fosterage. I suggest that it is a rarer phenomenon and one of more restricted scope than the secondary literature would suggest. The picture created in the secondary literature is based on the figure of Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn looms large within the primary sources and he appears throughout the Ulster Cycle, with many different foster-fathers. Examining the texts in which he appears we see that fosterage, even for a hero like Cú Chulainn, is first and foremost about the close emotional bonds he forms with his fictive family. In order to fully understand how the foster-paternal bonds were created, we need to appreciate the scope of that fosterage. In recreating a more restricted version of multiple fosterage, we see more space for the emotional bond to flourish.

It is for this reason that I have chosen to concentrate on multiple fosterage to illuminate the emotional space of foster-fatherhood. With the exception of Finn mac Cumhaill, when we see multiple fosterage in the texts, we see multiple foster-fathers. The gender imbalance here suggests that multiple fosterage was employed to further a fosterling's education, as foster-fathers are more associated with the educative aspect of fosterage. If fosterlings are to be passed around to cement as many alliances as possible, then there will be a premium on the space to create emotional ties that form the heart of those alliances. My analysis of the multiple fosterage texts is not meant to deny the existence of the practice – such an attempt would be doomed to failure.

However, I hope I have demonstrated that multiple does not necessarily equate with many. In fact, the examples of multiple fosterage show only two or three families involved and, within this number, there is always one primary emotional bond. This bond may or may not be the same as the primary legal bond. While political manoeuvrings may lie behind the creation of a fosterage bond, it is the emotional ties that the texts represent. Indeed, even where the political is invoked, it is through the emotional, as we can see in the *Life of Findchú*. The king of Leinster summons the saint to aid him in battle saying: ‘he has a son of mine and he will come in my house through fondness, for I am dear in his eyes because of my son’.²⁴⁵

I have addressed the question of multiple fosterage directly. Yet I have also illuminated some aspects of foster-fatherhood obliquely. The emotional bond referred to above is created through the education that foster-fathers – and some foster-mothers – hand down to their charges. The education can be explicit or implied but a period of fosterage leaves the fosterlings changed. Sometimes their identity even shifts as they adopt new names. Apart from changing the fosterling, the education created bonds of affection that last beyond the period of fosterage. The fosterers care for their charges into adulthood, aiding them in battle, in regal succession, and in affairs of the heart. Beyond this chapter’s conclusions about fosterage, the approach to the *Cú Chulainn* source material is one that I shall maintain throughout the thesis. The references to fosterage that we find throughout the medieval Irish corpus cannot be taken at face value, since they encode an amount of tacit knowledge and assumptions around the practice.

This chapter has demonstrated the limits of the traditional multiple fosterage narrative; it is not as extensive, in scope and ubiquity, as previously thought. ‘The Feast’ and ‘The Conception’ present two different narratives of *Cú Chulainn*’s fosterage. In the first, that seen in ‘The Feast’ ultimately deriving from ‘The Wooing of Emer’, it is dialogue that plays the most important part. In ‘The Wooing’ we see that fosterage changes the fosterling, although for *Cú Chulainn* it is the fosterage he describes that

²⁴⁵ *Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, p. 238.

creates his identity, not the fosterage he receives from Scáthach. However, the youthful hero is full of boast and the image that he is said to create is a false one, since it only exists in his dialogue and he later receives a more appropriate fosterage from Scáthach. The false image that becomes set in stone – or at least parchment – when it is inserted into a narrative about his birth in the *Lebor na hUidre*. This narrative obscures the other multiple fosterage of Cú Chulainn, reared in Ulster by a foster-father whose identity shifts from tale to tale, then receiving further training in Alba with the warrior woman Scáthach.

The emphasis on dialogue and self-fashioning in ‘The Wooing’ points out some of the ways in which fosterage cannot always be read straight. It can be a metaphor for care and affection, as we have seen in the examples of Lug and Fiacha. The picture of the emotional community that emerges from interrogating these text is of small family units creating affective bonds between foster-father and foster-son. These deep emotional bonds are not always positive, as in the case of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, in his death tale, and Domnall in *Fled Duin na nGéd*. So the emotions are not always positive, but they are strong motivating factors all the same. When these other tales are placed alongside the narratives of Cú Chulainn’s early life, the great differences between the Ulster hero and other characters in medieval Irish literature seem to fade. Where Cú Chulainn has a great profusion of tales, and so a profusion of conflicting narratives, each narrative taken individually is remarkably similar to those seen elsewhere. The similarity is most surprising when compared to the character considered his opposite in the medieval Irish corpus, Finn mac Cumail.

Throughout this chapter I have concentrated on the figure of Cú Chulainn in order to marshal, in a manageable fashion, the many different sources for studying foster-fathers in medieval Irish literature. Yet, what emerges from this chapter is that the separate elements of the foster-family cannot be so easily broken down into their constituent parts. The discussion has touched on the role of foster-siblings and foster-mothers as integral to our understanding of the role of foster-fathers. In the chapters that follow, those explicitly addressing the role of the foster-mother and the position

of the foster-sibling, foster-fathers will again appear. When recreating the emotional community of medieval Irish fosterage, we cannot look at separate bonds, separate strands. The foster-family is a complex in which each member forms emotional bonds in light of their ties to all other members. I have started mapping the emotional community with the bond of foster-father; it is to the other connections that I will now turn.

2. Mourning Foster-Mothers

2.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I examined the relationships between foster-fathers and their fosterlings through the character of Cú Chulainn. In this chapter I will turn to the foster-mothers and the emotional impact fosterage has on them. Instead of examining the relationship between foster-mothers and their charges through one character, I will examine this relationship through a point of crisis: the death of the fosterling and the lament made by the foster-mother. Structuring the analysis around death and mourning will allow us to interrogate a number of assumptions about both the mourning process, and more importantly, the emotional connection that existed between foster-mother and fosterling. What was the nature of the connection between foster-mothers and fosterling? Is mourning solely a female preserve? Why does the foster-mother appear at all in the mourning space? At a time of death it is vital to understand who has the emotional authority to partake in mourning.

In order to recreate the emotional community of fosterage it is as well to focus on the end of the relationship as the beginning. Indeed, in some cases, the end and the beginning are intimately linked. We see this in the structure of many heroic lives, where the foster-family who raised the young hero are the ones present at his death. Even Scáthach, the problematic foster-mother of Cú Chulainn, gets a pre-lament in her prophecy about her fosterling's future greatness and ultimate demise.²⁴⁶ Having foster-mothers as the ones who mourn the deaths of characters, rather than those characters' natural mothers, demonstrates that the foster-mothers have a privileged hold over the early life of their fosterlings. They are indicative of the passed life; they are the nurturers who are brought to grief on seeing their charges dead. In this sense the emotional connection between foster-mother and fosterling is what makes the

²⁴⁶ P. L. Henry, 'Verba Scáthaige', *Celtica* 21 (1990), 191-207.

foster-mother the guardian of memory. Who controls memory and who shapes memory is an important question to ask of family structures.

The lament in Ireland has a long history.²⁴⁷ Modern folkloric work on the keens and laments of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries gives us a sense of the lived experience of laments.²⁴⁸ However, there are a number of issues with collecting these poems as relics of oral history. Throughout this chapter, possibly more so than elsewhere in the thesis, we must be aware of the artificial nature of the texts. They purport to be genuine outbursts of emotion, yet this not so. The laments are shaped by the genre of text in which they appear. As one commentator on more recent keening has said: 'The event, as much as its principal interpreter, served to punctuate line and stanza, it provided a theme and prescribed its treatment, aided, interrupted and shaped the verse yet has been consistently regarded as being somehow separated from it'.²⁴⁹ How, then, do we approach these texts when there is no lived event surrounding them? Can we see emotional immediacy in fictions? As outlined in the Introduction, I will address different texts of different genres to pull out similarities and continuities.²⁵⁰ In many cases though, the presence of the foster-family is more indicative of an emotional bond than what is said.

At this point something needs to be said about the wider landscape of mourning in medieval Irish literature. When I say that foster-mothers play an important role in the mourning process, I do not suggest that they are the primary mourners. It is, of course, difficult to say with any certainty who the principle mourners are, but we must be aware of the other ways grief is expressed. Some of the most famous laments in Irish

²⁴⁷ See the recently published *Death and the Irish: A Miscellany*, ed. Salvador Ryan (Bray, 2016).

²⁴⁸ Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions*, (Amsterdam, 1998); Angela Bourke, 'More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry' in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, ed. Joan N. Radner (Chicago, 1993), pp. 160-82; 'The Irish Traditional Lament and Grieving Process', *Women's Studies International Forum* 11 (1988), pp. 287-91; Virginia S. Blankenhorn, "'Griogal Cridhe": Aspects of Transmission in the Lament for Griogair Ruadh Mac Griogair of Glen Strae', *Scottish Studies* 37: *Croabh nan Ubhal: A Festschrift for John MacInnes* (2014), pp. 6-36.

²⁴⁹ Sean Ó Coileáin, 'The Irish Lament: An Oral Genre', *Studia Hibernica* 24 (1988), 97-117: p. 97

²⁵⁰ The figure of the mourning foster-mother is used even in translated texts, in the story of Hypsipyle in the Thebaid. *Togail na Tebe. The Thebaid of Statius: The Irish Text*, ed. and trans. George Calder (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 134-37.

literature are those spoken by wives and lovers, mourning their lost partners. This is the case for the most famous keen of the modern era: that for Art Ó Laoghaire spoken by his wife Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill.²⁵¹ In the medieval period the lament of Derdriu for her lost lover and his brothers is similarly famed.²⁵² How this latter tale negotiates the different ways women's speech is valorised and demonised is instructive for our discussion on the voiced and voiceless laments.²⁵³ Therefore, what is said about the appearance of foster-mothers as mourners in this chapter, must be seen against a backdrop of a larger mourning tradition. That they provide a third option for female mourner in medieval Irish literature, beyond wife and mother, is testament to the central role of fosterage in medieval Irish society.

In order to provide this background, I begin with the Virgin Mary and other examples of mourning mothers. The Virgin Mary presents us with an interesting figure, since she is the central image of the quintessential mother and exemplary figure of mourning in medieval thought. Yet the image of the mourning Virgin spoke, not only to mothers but to all female relationships as Goodland says: 'the figure of a woman weeping for a man who was at once her son, husband, and father orchestrated the society's comprehension of bereavement'.²⁵⁴ Chapter four will address how the sacred family of Christianity related to the idea of fosterage. Here I seek only to examine how her relationship to Jesus can be described as fosterage. The depiction of the Virgin as fosterer to Jesus, and indeed the whole Trinity, is theologically difficult, given her clear maternal connection. Yet it is illuminating of the role of foster-mother. In this discussion I will draw out the centrality of nurturing to the creation of a deep emotional bond. In so doing we see that the roles of mother and foster-mother are not

²⁵¹ Seán Ó Tuama, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, (Dublin, 1961).

²⁵² *Longes mac nUislenn: The exile of the sons of Uisliu*, ed. by Vernam Hull (New York, 1949), pp. 48-50.

²⁵³ Maria Tymoczko, 'Animal Imagery in *Loinges Mac nUislenn*', *Studia Celtica* 20 (1985), 145-66; Máire Herbert, 'The Universe of Male and Female: A Reading of the Deirdre Story' in *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples: Proceedings of the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. C. Byrne et al. (Halifax, 1992), pp. 53-64.

²⁵⁴ Katherine Goodland, *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 4.

necessarily discrete. The combination of foster-mother and mother is not restricted to the Virgin; the figure of Sadb from *Cath Maige Mucrama* plays on the tensions in her two roles.

From a discussion of Sadb and some Biblical mothers, I will address how the foster-mother acts as a guardian of memory. She has a central role in the early life of many characters from medieval Irish literature and as such she is the one who can recall that early life when it has passed. This role does not only emerge at the death of a fosterling but in old age. I will examine two instances of the foster-mother as guardian of memory: Cáma for the *fián* and the Caillech Bérré, as a more universal symbol of loss. Indeed, the openness of the foster relationship is central to our understanding of the role of foster-mother as guardian of memory. Since the role of foster-mother is not restricted by biology, the figure of the mourning foster-mother allows access to grief on a wider scale. This, in part, lies behind the Virgin Mary's role as foster-mother, as well as the depiction of the Caillech.

The last two sections are extended cases studies; in the first section I examine some of the death tales of Níall Noígíallach, Níall of the Nine Hostages. The manuscript variations, as well as the different tales told in the *Dindsenchas*, give different accounts of the same death. What is instructive here is the choice of who gets to grieve. As mentioned earlier, this choice illuminates emotional connections to the deceased. For Níall it is always the foster-family who mourns, but with different members being present and speaking. These texts question the assumption that women are always the most appropriate choice of mourner. The final section is an extended reading of a thirteenth-century poem *Teasda eochair ghlaís Ghaedheal*, 'The key to the lock of the Irish'.²⁵⁵ This lament mourns the death of five-year-old Gormlaith, fostered with the Ó Néills. The foster-mother's reaction is the emotional heart of the poem. The description of the foster-mother is striking but the figure is also used to widen the participation in the grief. This forms part of the poet's agenda with this piece.

This chapter will demonstrate that the love and affection between foster-

²⁵⁵ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams, pp. 22-29.

mother and fosterling was used to great effect by medieval Irish writers depicting grief. Wives and mothers were also mourners but the foster-mother could be present at the death of the fosterling, in her nurturing role, to recall the early life of the deceased character. The return to the beginning of their lives at the end creates an affective, structured framework to the hero's life. Seeing such an affective bond at this point of crisis allows us to appreciate the foster-mother's central role in the emotional community of fosterage.

2.2. Is the Virgin Mother a Foster-Mother?

It may seem odd to begin a chapter on foster-mothers with the Virgin Mary, the quintessential biological mother. However, I want to address this difficult figure because how she is presented in some Irish sources allows us to glimpse the emotional assumptions that surround foster-motherhood. In those instances in which the Virgin Mother is referred to as a fosterer, we can see some assumptions around foster-motherhood by investigating why an Irish author would choose this image over the more common maternal one. Furthermore, this chapter is taking the image of the mourning foster-mother as a way to analyse her emotional role within the foster-family. When discussing ideals of female mourning in the Middle Ages, the shadow cast by the Virgin Mary is a long one. The other examples of mourning foster-mothers discussed in this chapter will, in some way, interact with the image of the mourning Mary. In this section I will demonstrate how the Virgin Mary was thought of in fosterage terms. This affects both her relationship with her son, and with humankind in general. This latter image is particularly apt, as it is redolent of a close and deeply felt emotional connection, but an emotional connection that can be extended outside the blood family. That Mary's love for humankind is thought of in fosterage terms, is not only illuminating of the religious experience, something discussed more fully in chapter four, but has implications for the way the maternal and foster-maternal interact.

The presentation of the Virgin as a foster-mother is something we find in a number of poems. I will turn to the wider use of fosterage imagery in religious contexts in chapter four. Here I will solely concern myself with the Virgin Mary as fosterer. She is the mother par excellence, so the question must be asked: why add to this image with one of motherhood at a remove? Yet, fosterage imagery used of the holy family is not without precedent. After all Joseph was the foster-father of Jesus, so his role could have altered the way the Virgin's was presented. In the *Féilire Óengusso* notes on 19 March, it comments on Joseph: 'is uaisli aite Issu do rad ris anda Ioseph' 'it is nobler to call him Jesus's foster-father than Joseph'.²⁵⁶ Joseph though, is not the biological father of Jesus, so this seems more fitting. While Joseph is the foster-father of Jesus, the Virgin is his mother; how does she resolve the tensions of what would seem incompatible roles?

In a very striking poem, attributed to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh (d. 1244), she is addressed as the foster-mother of the Trinity, while also containing the Trinity in her womb. The true identity of Donnchadh has been disputed by Breeze and as such the date of the poem has been challenged.²⁵⁷ The poem addresses the central mystery of the incarnation; that Mary nursed, or fostered Jesus, and in his body, the Trinity: 'Trí dhalta Mhuire móire toircheas bronn na banóighe' 'Three foster-sons of great Mary, offspring of the Virgin's womb'.²⁵⁸ This quotation highlights some of the tensions played on in the poem. Although the Trinity are most often referred to as the fosterlings in this poem, the Incarnation is also referred to. In his analysis of the poem Breeze concentrates on the image of the Trinity contained in the Virgin's womb and how this image is related to continental depictions of the *vierges ouvranes*.²⁵⁹ While the links created between this image and how the Virgin was depicted on the

²⁵⁶ FO, pp. 100-01.

²⁵⁷ *Dán Dé: The poems of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh*, ed. by Lambert McKenna (Dublin, 1922), pp. viii-ix. The more famous poet called Donnchadh Ó Dálaigh died in 1244, but there was another with the same name active before 1400.

²⁵⁸ Andrew Breeze, 'Two Bardic Themes: The Trinity in the Blessed Virgin's Womb and the Rain of Folly', *Celtica* 22 (1991), 1-15: p. 3.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

Continent are illuminating, the fosterage imagery used throughout the poem has been neglected. Indeed, the fosterage imagery is more prevalent than that of the womb. The concentration on the breast and nursing imagery is also found in a Welsh poem, also of the twelfth century, which has the refrain 'Meekyt Meir mab' 'Mary nursed her Son'.²⁶⁰

Fosterage language exists alongside the maternal imagery of the poem. The poem opens by concisely expressing its conceit: 'buime trír máthair mhic Dé' 'The Son of God's mother is the foster-mother of three'.²⁶¹ The juxtaposition of the maternal and foster-maternal plays on the surprising use of the fosterage imagery. There is a difference drawn between her role as mother and her role as foster-mother. The presentation of Mary here encapsulates, in one person, the tensions that can exist between the two roles. Indeed, this is how the poet chooses to end the poem: 'is í a mháthair 's a mhuime' 'it is she who is his mother and foster-mother'.²⁶² The two roles are placed side by side, united in the person of the Virgin but separated syntactically. As a mother she gives birth to Jesus, but it is as a foster-mother that she creates the nurturing and caring relationship, which is extended to the other members of the Trinity.

One interpretation of the image of Mary as *muime* of the Trinity, is that we are being presented with the 'nurse' rather than foster-mother. The difficulty lies in distinguishing between these two words. We have seen how fostering includes a central nutritive element and fosterlings can be taken in at a young age. It may not be useful to distinguish the terms, since caring relationships can be formed between wet-nurses and their charges. There has been a tendency in some of the older translations to render *muime* as nurse often. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, the translations are more reflections of twentieth-century practices, and were often made before the breast-feeding element of fosterage was fully understood. Now it is widely

²⁶⁰ *Hen Gerddi Crefyddol*, ed. by Henry Lewis (Cardiff, 1931), pp.17-18.

²⁶¹ *Dioghluim dána*, ed. by Lambert McKenna (Dublin, 1938), pp. 29-30.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

accepted that nursing formed an integral part of the fosterage process.²⁶³ This poem does have many references to the nursing figure and the physicality of the child at the breast. However, I have noted in the previous chapter how the breast is the physical representation of (female) fosterage. Mary's role as the foster-mother of three, further moves the image away from the nursing mother towards more foster-like presence. The more embracing image of foster-motherhood is a central conceit in the Virgin's portrayal. The other phrases that describe Mary's relationship are indicative of fosterage:

'Ag inghin an fhuil leabhair
maith do uair a oileamhain
a hathair i n-ucht Mhuire
athaidh i gcurp cholluidhe'

Well was he fostered
by the girl with the long, smooth hair
Mary's own Father in her bosom
for a while in an earthly body'²⁶⁴

The use of *oileamhain* is a strong indication that she is fostering the child. The way the contrast is drawn between the child on the breast of the nursing woman and the all-powerful Father in heaven is the same as the image in *Ísucán*, the poem in which the speaker fosters the Christ Child: 'Little Jesus is at home on high/even though he be in my bosom (*ucht*)'.²⁶⁵

The presentation of the Virgin as a foster-mother opens up the relationship beyond the bounds of the natal family. She is foster-mother to her son, but also to the Holy Spirit and to the Father. The fosterage bond is created by an experience of shared intimacy, open beyond the natal family. The relationships are forged on shared feeling and the foster-mother is the means by which anyone, sharing the experience, creates an emotional tie. Such a notion appears in *Buime trír* in § 9, when discussing 'the three who were her three foster-sons'. It is said that: 'each of these kings is shared with us'.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Bronagh Ní Chonaill, 'Contentious Kinship: The Penumbra of Established Kinship in Medieval Irish Law' in *Tome: Studies in Medieval Celtic History and Law in Honour of Thomas Charles-Edwards*, ed. by Fiona Edmonds and Paul Russell (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 173-182; Boll, 'Foster-Kin in Conflict', p. 24.

²⁶⁴ *Dioghluim dána*, ed. McKenna, pp. 29-30.

²⁶⁵ Quin, '*Ísucán*', pp. 43, 50.

²⁶⁶ *Dioghluim dána*, ed. McKenna, pp. 29-30. I have slightly emended the translation.

The repeated foster imagery is the means by which these miraculous foster-sons are given to us. The practice is founded on sharing, on sharing one's children and sharing affection with them. Representing the Trinity as foster-sons, mediated by the Virgin Mary, allows the audience to share an emotional bond with them. The greater openness, provided through the foster-mother, is exploited in the mourning texts. This chapter will be concerned with who has access to the dead. The notion of gaining access via fosterage, and the affection created in that relationship, is seen in this poem when the Trinity are referred to as the three keys to Mary's castle 'trí heochracha mhúir Muire'.²⁶⁷ The image of the key is also employed in Giolla Brigdhe Mac Con Midhe's poetry.

If the Virgin can be represented as a foster-mother, we can place this alongside her role as the archetypal mourner to see how this figure influenced depictions of other mourning foster-mothers. In the words of O'Dwyer the Virgin Mary was a figure that appealed to the mind of the Irish.²⁶⁸ The woman at the foot of the Cross is the archetype of mourning, although, in the words of McKenna, we can see 'a very strange and theologically incorrect view of the Passion' on display in some bardic poems' image of her. These refer to Jesus as Mary's *dalta* and frame her as the 'the foster-mother (*buime*) who saved the world'.²⁶⁹ Breeze sees Mary's mourning as the best means to access the Irish thoughts on the Crucifixion, but all the examples he cites, though they are only of the motif of the Virgin's tears of blood, are later than the fifteenth century.²⁷⁰ Yet there is a sense in which the lament of the Virgin Mary will always be different from other human laments. The death of Christ is a tragedy for Mary but ultimately a victory for mankind. The salvific importance of the death explains how the figure of the mourning Mary is adopted by others, by Blathmac and the later bardic poets, to

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Peter O'Dwyer, *Mary: A History of Devotion in Ireland* (Dublin, 1988), p. 23.

²⁶⁹ *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh*, ed. by Lambert McKenna (Dublin, 1919), pp. ix, 14. Mary as foster-mother of Jesus has also been noted for Welsh poetry of the same period. Madeleine Gray and Salvador Ryan, 'Mother of Mercy: The Virgin Mary and the Last Judgement in Welsh and Irish Tradition' in *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Karen Jankulak and Jonathan M. Wooding (Dublin, 2007) pp. 246-61: p. 249.

²⁷⁰ Andrew Breeze, *The Mary of the Celts* (Leominster, 2008), pp. 90, 106.

illuminate their own failings and losses.²⁷¹ These human losses can be fully lamented, whereas there is always something triumphant in the death of Christ, even though it may be mourned by the Virgin Mary.

With these considerations in mind, let us turn to arguably the most famous example of Marian grief in the corpus of medieval Irish poetry: the poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan. In one of the two surviving poems he begins, 'Come to me, loving (*boí*d) Mary'.²⁷² The exhortation to join with the poet is the central conceit of the poem. The poet himself takes on the expression of mourning, in contrast with Mary's restraint: 'the poet here asks to mourn unrestrainedly along with Mary, simultaneously identifying himself and her with the affective piety of women'.²⁷³ Mary is imagined as the centre of grief and the poet comes to her to partake in that grieving act. The figure of the Virgin allows the poet to partake in her grief, she is the starting point for Blathmac's outbursts. In the same way, I will argue that foster-mothers open the moment of grieving out. As figures with wider emotional appeal they allow others beyond the biological family to partake in the grief. However, throughout this poem the focus remains on Blathmac, rather than the Virgin. What we do not see is how the Virgin expresses her own grief. She is a cipher for the poet with very little agency of her own.

Mary takes on a problematic role when she appears as mother and foster-mother of Jesus. At his death, there is another complicated relationship to negotiate: the ties of blood between Jesus and those who caused him to be crucified. In the Blathmac poem, part of the criticism levelled against the Jews for their killing of Jesus is based on the blood relationship: 'they have crucified – beautiful form! – the body of Christ, their sister's son' and they are called his maternal kin (*maithre*) throughout.²⁷⁴ This is a motif not confined to Blathmac. It was a very common trope, in Irish

²⁷¹ *The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan: together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and a poem on the Virgin Mary*, ed. by James Carney (London, 1964).

²⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

²⁷³ *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing IV & V: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. by Angela Bourke and others (Cork, 1992-2005), IV, p. 60.

²⁷⁴ *The Poems of Blathmac*, ed. Carney, pp. 34-5, 16.

reflections on the Passion, to accuse the Jews of *finjal* or kin-slaying. This adds to their crimes, since legal and wisdom texts frequently highlight the horrific nature of *finjal*.²⁷⁵ Beyond this, though, the relationship between maternal kin and young children is seen as especially close. We have seen in chapter one how Cú Chulainn's relationship with Conchobur and the Ulaid is framed. Bitel has posited that this system is used as a means by which the maternal kin were brought, in a legal sense, into the life of their niece or nephew.²⁷⁶ In her work on how women interacted with the fosterage process, Bitel points out some of the tensions that could exist between foster-mothers and natal mothers. For example, the *Dindsenchas* on Dumae Selga tells the tale of the swine of Derbriu. They were her human foster-children but their natural mother turned them into swine. Derbriu continued to care for the pigs in the face of maternal hostility.²⁷⁷ Here the foster-mother proves more nurturing than the maternal kin, although the maternal kin can be fosterers. What is important in all these cases is the act of nurturing. Birth itself was not the defining act: 'birth mothers lost what might have been their natural and unique status in a procreation-obsessed culture'.²⁷⁸ Nurturing is the important element that creates a close bond. Such nurturing could be performed by a mother or a foster-mother. This open-endedness lies at the heart of the Virgin's dual role and also points to a reason why a foster-mother would supersede a birth mother in mourning.

The Virgin Mary, as ever, presents us with a complex image of motherhood and nurturing. Her close emotional connection to Jesus has been characterised as a nurturing role as distinct from her maternal role in the Incarnation. Blathmac draws these two roles apart when he refers to 'the son you have born and have reared (*ron-ailt*)', and Zacharias separates the two roles in the Irish Gospel of Thomas.²⁷⁹ This would seem to reduce the impact of her maternal role, her place as the Virgin Mother. Yet,

²⁷⁵ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 127.

²⁷⁶ Bitel, *The Land of Women*, pp. 108-09.

²⁷⁷ Whitley Stokes, 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*', *RC* 15(1894), 272-336, 418-84; *RC* 16 (1895), 31-83, 135-67, 269-312, 468: p. 470-2.

²⁷⁸ Bitel, *The Land of Women*, p. 103.

²⁷⁹ *The Poems of Blathmac*, pp. 68-69; 100-01.

given the Irish concept of how the maternal role was created, as an act of nurturing beyond giving birth, it would seem clear that the Virgin should be the foster-mother as well. Not only does it lend her figure the emotional weight of the role of foster-mother, but it opens up the caring relationship to Christ. I will go into more detail as to how the fosterage metaphor functioned in religious texts in chapter four. It suffices to say here, that the use of fosterage imagery allows humanity to approach Christ, through his foster-mother, as well as explaining Mary's foster-maternal care for humanity. The notion of Mary's care embodied in fosterage is seen in the way Brigit is addressed. In her Middle Irish Life she is called 'Mary of the Irish', and elsewhere 'the foster-mother of the Irish'.²⁸⁰ Both means of address arise from Brigit's care for the community of the Irish. Finally, the foster-maternal role does away with any tensions created by Mary's blood ties to the Jewish community. I will address the tensions between the maternal and foster-maternal roles in the next section.

2.3. Mothers and Foster-Mothers

We cannot use the Virgin Mary as the only model of mourning motherhood with which to compare the foster-mother's outpourings. In this section I will address some Biblical and some Irish narratives in which mothers are presented as mourning. While this chapter is working to highlight the presence of foster-family, especially foster-mothers, at the site of mourning, they are by no means the only figures present. It is interesting to note how similar elements are used in maternal and foster-maternal mourning, as well as the choice of who is described as present in mourning. Mourning was rarely just for one individual, but one for many characters to partake in. In many cases it is the choice of who to make present that is more illuminating than the actions

²⁸⁰ *Three Middle-Irish Homilies on the Lives of Saints Patrick, Brigit, and Columba*, ed. by Whitley Stokes (Calcutta, 1877), pp. 60-1; *Mumme Góidel* in 'Brigit Buadach' ed. by Rudolf Thurneysen in *Irische Texte mit Wörterburch*, ed. by Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes, 4 vols (1880-1909), III (1897), p. 71.

of the mourners.

One central Biblical model of maternal mourning is the Massacre of the Innocents. There is an Irish poem on the Massacre of the Innocents, preserved in the *Leabar Breac*.²⁸¹ The lament appears as part of a series of homilies on the life of Christ, throughout which the author often breaks into poetic aside. As far as I am aware the poem has not been dated, although Greene and O'Connor refer to the language as 'late Middle Irish'.²⁸² Given the background to the lament, it is clear why mothers are made central. The poem is divided into four parts, each spoken by a different mother. The division of the lament and multiple speakers reminds us of how different women would partake in the lament and the dialogic nature of many other laments to be found in medieval Irish narrative. Although they are mourning their own sons, who have been taken away to be killed, the anonymous nature of the victims and the way in which the massacre is usually portrayed gives a sense the child as a universal figure is being mourned. Indeed, one of the mothers, crying out at the injustice of the massacre, inadvertently highlights this reading: 'You are seeking to kill one, yet you are killing many'. Of course, this describes what is happening in the narrative, but the substitution of one child for many can be read metaphorically. This notion of the individual child representing more than itself, representing children and futurity is something we see in the poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe. It must also be remembered that it is easier to create a future in the imagination, that has been cut off in reality.

Yet despite the centrality of the mother, elements of fosterage do appear in this lament. I will begin with a reference that is difficult to interpret. The second mother's lament includes the line 'M'óite cen lúach' which Meyer translates as 'His foster-father has lost his hire'.²⁸³ This reading appears to make sense, given that the foster-father would have lost the monetary investment that he made in the foster-son. However,

²⁸¹ Dublin, RIA, MS 23 P 16, f. 141

²⁸² David Greene and Frank O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry A.D. 600 to 1200* (London, 1967), p. 191.

²⁸³ Kuno Meyer, 'The Mothers' Lament at the Slaughter of the Innocents', *The Gaelic Journal* 4.38 (May, 1891), 89-90.

Meyer arrives at this translation by emending the original line's 'M' foiti cen luach' and taking the first singular possessive to be a third singular, shifting from 'my foster-father' to 'his foster-father', even though the line comes in a sequence beginning with the first person possessives.²⁸⁴ If Meyer's reading is correct and this is a reference to the dead child's foster-father, we can see that fosterage is integral when conjuring up the child's former existence. That the line comes in a list describing the woman's bodily reaction to her loss, places the fosterage element at the centre of the emotional life of the child.

The bodily reaction is a common means of expressing loss. The maternal and foster-maternal are linked in the way that the mother's loss is described as physically similar to the physical markers of fosterage we have examined. There are constant references to the breast as the site of loss. The poem begins with the executioner taking a child from his mother's breast: 'as she plucked her son from her breast (*asa hucht*) for the executioner'.²⁸⁵ A tender image that links mothers and foster-mothers is found in *Togail na Tebe* describing the monster snatching children 'a hochtaib a maithrech 7 a muimed' 'from their mothers' and foster-mothers' bosoms'.²⁸⁶ Moving from the *ucht* we see the breast, *cích*, is called upon throughout the poem: 'Mé ro thusim, mo chích ros-ib. Mo brú ros-imorchuis, m'inne ro shúig' 'It was I who bore him, he drank my breast/My womb carried him about, he sucked my vitals' 'Mo chícche cen loimm' 'My breasts are sapless' 'Mo chícche 'na tast' 'My breasts are silent'.²⁸⁷ While there are references to wombs and the fact these women gave birth to their children, the emotional connection is established via the breast. The breast, from which the child is said to drink, is the site of rearing and nurturing that is available to all, not just the biological mothers. The breast is the site of physical intimacy and, even when describing how they bore their children, images of feeding are used. The universal children are made more accessible through this imagery that approaches a wide

²⁸⁴ Greene and O'Connor retain the sense of the possessive and try to incorporate the 'f' beyond scribal hypercorrection, but this leads to a translation of questionable sense: 'my journey [?] without reward'. This could be interpreted as 'fáthi' 'enfolding' but again the sense seems to be difficult to access.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ *Togail na Tebe*, ed. Calder, pp. 32-3.

²⁸⁷ Meyer, 'The Mothers' Lament', pp. 89-90.

audience and greater emotional connect outside the family. The breast is a site of nurturing and the fact that it is called on to mourn these young deaths is illuminating. It is an affective image to employ, but it is an image that is not solely confined to the birth mother.

It is at this stage that I would like to briefly address the image of mourning biological mothers that appear in Irish narratives. This is not the place in which to begin a comprehensive survey of the material. Yet it is worth pointing out how the actions of mourning foster-mothers, and of the wider foster-family, have close parallels to the actions of the natal family. What we see is a shared vocabulary and mode of expression. The choice of whose voice to place the mourning in, then, becomes paramount to how the mourning is to be understood. When we look at how mourning is depicted in the bloody Cycle of Kings or the historical tales about more recent kings, such as *Caithréim Cellachain Caisil*, *Cogad Gáedhel re Gallaibh* or *Caithréim Thoirdhealbaigh*, a rather formulaic picture emerges.²⁸⁸ The lament is often difficult to distinguish from panegyric in the way physical beauty and martial prowess are praised. The lament can be spoken by mothers, fathers or brothers. In the later texts, such as *Cogad Gáedhel*, the hero laments his brother, but this is in a sense more motivated by a quest for vengeance than anything else.²⁸⁹

In all these cases poetry is the appropriate medium for lament. In some texts, the poems are totally divorced from the action of the narrative and inserted with a clear eye to the intertextuality. For example, in *Aided Crimthainn*, after the eponymous hero dies of poison, a lament is made: 'because of that the historian sang this'. Within the narrative the people who are most moved by the death of Crimthann are 'his father and his mother and his foster-mother'.²⁹⁰ On coming to the place of his death, they all

²⁸⁸ *Caithreim Cellachain Caisil: the victorious career of Cellachan of Cashel*, ed. and trans. by Alexander Bugge, (Christiania, 1905); *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: The war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, ed. and trans. by James Henthorn Todd, (London, 1867); *Caithréim Thoirdhealbaigh: The triumphs of Turlough*, ed. and trans. by Standish Hayes O'Grady, 2 vols (London, 1929).

²⁸⁹ *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, ed. Todd, pp. 88-91.

²⁹⁰ Whitley Stokes, 'The Death of Crimthann son of Fidach and the Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedon', *RC* 24 (1903), 172-207: p. 178.

give a mournful cry without words, and perish. This raises two common points for mourning in medieval Irish texts. Firstly, the contrast between the wordless wailing and the formal poetry. The contrast is reflected in the more modern accounts of keening.²⁹¹ In medieval texts the tension between speech and cry is often gendered. In *Aided Crimthainn* the juxtaposition of women and wailing suggest they are the ones performing it. His father, Fidach, is the only named character; his mother and foster-mother are anonymous. The anonymity of certain female characters in the mourning process will be addressed later. Secondly, the death by grief of close family members is a common trope. I will address this impulse when discussing the *Dindshenchas* material, but at this stage it is worth noting that all three of them are carried off. The foster-mother's heartbreak is equivalent to that of the father and mother.

Although the poem on the death of Crimthann was displaced into the voice of the extra-textual 'historian' the fact that father, mother and foster-mother were brought together in the mourning process is a common feature. In *Cath Maige Mucrama*, the eponymous battle is lamented by another combination of foster and natal family, although the picture here is complicated by the action of the tale.²⁹² Three laments are given in sequence by Ailill Ólom, his foster-son Mac Con, and Ailill's wife Sadb. They all mourn different aspects of what has passed: Ailill laments the loss of his estate, Mac Con the loss of his fool. Sadb, the foster-mother of Mac Con, mourns both the death of her brother Art and her own sons. What is left of this foster-family is united in mourning, or at least in the juxtaposition of their laments, even if the subject of their mourning is different.

Sadb's lament is appropriate for the different members of her blood family, but she refers to them obliquely through their fathers, not through her own connection to them. Sadb has two stanzas of lament, each beginning 'Alas for me! Alas for Clíu! When Fer Fíth was found in his yew-tree'.²⁹³ This couplet, with a minor alteration, also begins her later lament for Mac Con, her foster-son. Sadb demonstrates how and why a

²⁹¹ Angela Bourke, 'Performing – Not Writing', *Graph* 11 (1991), 28-31.

²⁹² For a genealogy see Appendix 1.

²⁹³ CMM, pp. 58-9.

mother and foster-mother would lament in the same fashion. They have suffered the same loss. Mac Con's mother makes no appearance in the tale, the emotional weight comes from Sadb alone. In her position, at the centre of a complex entanglement of foster and blood kin, she has lost the most and bears the great lamenting role in the tale. Further her lament draws attention to the beginning of the tale; to the action which began the series of disasters which ends in death for everyone. Laments are characterised by linking the end with the beginning in a futile effort to conjure up the previous state of happiness.

The lamenter can use the lost loved one as a means to conjure up a lost past. Who gets to make the lament, will define who is the guardian of the past, the guardian of memory. In the next section I will address this role, beginning with Cáma from *Acallam na Senórach*. The foster-mother is often the guardian of memory. Since she holds a close emotional connection to what has been lost, she holds the best chance of recovering it. As the guardian of memory she mediates between the lost individual and those wishing to recall their past. The use of individual loss to point to wider feelings of loss was seen in the laments of the mothers of the Innocents and in the figure of Sadb, who mourns for all the loss in *Cath Maige Mucrama*. The imagery in the Massacre of the Innocents poem and dual role of Sadb points to the similarity between maternal and foster-maternal mourning. In this section I have shown how similar they are and, in a sense, how artificial it is to separate them.

2.4. Foster-Mothers as Guardians of Memory

The *Acallam na Senórach* or 'Colloquy of the Ancients' is a late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century text in which Caílte and Oisín travel Ireland telling Patrick tales of the *flan*.²⁹⁴ At the beginning of the text, the last two remaining warriors of the *flan*,

²⁹⁴ For more on the date and manuscripts of the *Acallam* see Ann Dooley, 'The Date and Purpose of *Acallam na Senórach*', *Éigse* 34 (2004), 97-126; Gerard Murphy, *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Cork, 1971), pp. 24-6; *Agallamh na Seanórach* ed. by Nessa Ní Shéaghda, 3 vols. (1942-45), I, (1942), pp. vii-xxxvi.

Cáilte and Oisín, go to find comfort at the house of Cáma, who is described as Finn's foster-mother. This is the reason Oisín gives for coming together:

'ó nach maireann do shenaibh na Féinde & do shen-mhuindtir Fhind mhic Chumhaill acht triar amháin .i. misi & tusa, á Cháilti, & Cámha in bhanfhlaith & in ban-choimétaidh ro bhúi ac coimhét Fhind mhic Cumhaill ón uair fa macaem h-é gusin laithe a fuair bás." "Dligmít feis dithat na h-aidchi-so di," ar Cáilte, "uair ní h-éiter a rímh ná a aisnéis in mhéit ro thoirbir in flaith-féindidh Find di-si do shétaibh & do mháinibh"'²⁹⁵

"of the elders of the *fían*, the old companions of Finn mac Cumhaill, only the three of us remain; you, Cáilte, and I, and the lady and guardian Cáma, who watched over Finn from his boyhood until the very day of his death" "We can certainly expect hospitality from her tonight," said Cáilte, "for no one could count or describe the gifts and treasures that Finn, the lord of the *fían*, gave to her."

When they reach Cáma's house they spend the night entertained in the manner to which they were accustomed as members of the *fían*, but this old style of entertainment is tinged with sadness. Towards the end of the night they weep, recalling this passed way of life: 'And though they were manly warriors, they together with lady Cáma wept deeply and disconsolately (*ro cháisetar co dubach dobrónach*)'.²⁹⁶

Although the mourning here is broader than the loss of a single person – what is being mourned is the heroic past – it is instructive that Cáilte and Oisín decide to visit Cáma to mourn it. She is the only one left in Ireland who can adequately recreate this passed life, so in that sense, she is the guardian of the memory of the *fían*. As Cáilte and Oisín were both members of the *fían*, who retell the heroic exploits of the *fían*, it seems odd that they can only fully recreate that past with Cáma. Indeed, in the rest of the *Acallam* it is they who are the guardians of memory, unearthing, sometimes literally, the Fenian way of life. I would argue that Cáma's role as guardian of memory is because she is '*ban-choimétaid*', 'female guardian' of Finn mac Cumhaill.²⁹⁷ In this role

²⁹⁵ AnS, p. 1.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁹⁷ Nagy interprets her as Finn's foster-mother in *Wisdom of the Outlaw*, p. 104: 'This multiform of the foster-mother figure, who in a touching scene mourns the passing of the Fenian era, actually outlives her charge'. Regardless of whether the figure of the foster-mother is multiform in the stories about Finn, the fact that she provides for him, is seen to provide food, and enjoys the reciprocal kindness expected from a foster-son, places her clearly in the foster-mother position.

she looks after Finn from his boyhood – and again the term *macaim* is used – to his death. The fact that she watched over him (*ac coimhét*) until Finn's death demonstrates that the foster-relationship extended beyond childhood and period in which the fosterling was the legal responsibility of the foster parents.²⁹⁸ This should not be surprising given the emotional connection between foster-mothers and fosterlings. The reciprocity of the relationship is seen in the gifts Finn gives her and, indeed, one of the duties of a fosterling is to care for the foster-parents in their old age.²⁹⁹ Foster-mothers are involved in the whole trajectory of the lives of their charges. Of course, outlining the various life stages of Finn mac Cumail is a difficult business, given his position as an eternally liminal character.

Cáma is still involved in the lives of the *ffian*, for whom she acts as foster-mother. The role of foster-mother encodes tensions between past and present so Cáma is ideally placed to recreate the lost lifestyle. Her authority comes from the past, when she was the foster-mother, but that role persists into the present of the text. She can unite the past and present, even if this is done to finally dispose of the past. They all engage in mourning behaviour as Cáma recites tales of their former companions and former life. The image of Cáilte and Oisín mourning alongside Cáma not only highlights how she curates access to the past but it reinforces how she creates the fictive kin bonds in the present. She, Cáilte, and Oisín are drawn into an affective network by the mourning. This is why, after they have shared this mourning experience 'their parting was as the parting of the soul from its body'.³⁰⁰ Cáma recreates the past and creates an affective network in the present through the way she provides for the two warriors. She is the only one in the land who can adequately recreate their former entertainment, bringing the past into the present and creating a place in which to recall the memories of the lost *ffian*. In her hospitality she provides, 'freshest food and oldest drinks'.³⁰¹ Even the physical manifestations of the old order are a complex

²⁹⁸ See Introduction, § 0.4.

²⁹⁹ *Cáin Lánamna*, ed. Eska, pp. 96-7.

³⁰⁰ AnS, p. 2.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

combination of old and new. However, while it is true that Cáma can provide a physical manifestation of the old life, a place around which to build the memories central to the mourning process, this is only temporary; as any more traditional act of mourning is. Her role as foster-mother allows her recreate this past for what is left of the *ffian*.

The fact that the central tale of this cycle is based around Caílte and Oisín recalling for Patrick the stories that marked these days of high heroics is testament enough to the tension between past and present in the *ffianaigecht*. In Nagy's view, Caílte and Oisín are the means by which the past and present are negotiated: 'Caílte ... yearns for the old Fenian life and still attempts to live it, functioning as a reverse psychopomp who in some episodes can literarily revive the old memories'.³⁰² He draws a parallel between these figures and the long-lived or revenant figure who commonly initiates dialogues such as these. Caílte and Oisín mediate for Patrick but Cáma mediates for the *ffian* in a different manner. The *ffian* members themselves recreate the lost world through their stories. This form of recapturing what is lost is inherently flawed, in a way that the text itself acknowledges: because of their age they have forgotten all but a third of what has happened to them.³⁰³ Cáma, on the other hand, is recreating, in a live sense, the entertainments that they used to enjoy. Not only is the way the past is accessed different but there is something to be said about the positioning of Cáma in the prologue to the text.

The role of Cáma, as foster-mother of Finn but also as tutelary foster-mother for the entire *ffian* is something that we can see elsewhere. In *Sanas Cormaic* there is as reference to Búanann as the foster-mother (*mumí*) of the Fíán. We can also see, in this entry, how the maternal and foster-maternal can be combined. As well as *muime* she is described as 'quasi mater erat na fíán' and in this role she is said to be like Anu, the mother of the gods.³⁰⁴ This figure demonstrates parallels between her tutelary role and the fosterage imagery used on the Virgin Mary in order to extend her care to all

³⁰² Joseph Falaky Nagy, 'Fenian Heroes and Their Rites of Passage', *Béaloides* 54/55 (1986/87), 161-182: p. 167.

³⁰³ AnS, p. 9.

³⁰⁴ 'Sanas Cormaic', ed. Meyer, p. 11.

humankind. Cáma's role as foster-mother is contrasted with maternal imagery, since in the opening to the *Acallam*, her childlessness is commented upon by Oisín:

Is toirrsech indíu Cámha
do-rála i cind a snámha.
Cámha gan mac is gan h-úa
do-rála conadh senrúa.³⁰⁵

Cáma is weary today,
she is at the end of her journey;
Childless, heirless,
old age is upon her.

The sorrow that Cáma is feeling at the loss of her foster-son – and indeed all her (metaphorical) foster-children in the *ffian* – is juxtaposed with her childlessness. Although the members of the *ffian* were young men their loss is invoked in terms of lacking children and a new generation.

The lament for a passed way of life, combined with a bleak prospect for the future is also found in the Lament of the Old Woman of Beare.³⁰⁶ This lament is one of the most famous in the medieval Irish corpus, Greene and O'Connor call it 'the greatest of Irish poems' and Wagner calls her 'the most famous old lady in Irish literature'.³⁰⁷ The figure of the Caillech Bhéarra has a long life, much like the supposed speaker of the poem, appearing in folklore up to the twentieth century. However, the lament has been dated to c.900.³⁰⁸ This would be just out of my historical range but the centrality of this lament to the tradition and, more generally, the voices of women in poetry, makes it worthy of comment. As the focus of this chapter is on mourning foster-mothers something needs to be said about the Caillech's role as foster-mother. Although the poem does not mention her foster-family, her great age is understood through fosterage in the introduction: 'The reason why she was called the Old Woman of Beare was that she had fifty foster-children (*cóica dalta dí*) in Beare'.³⁰⁹ This is not the only evidence of her exceptional old age, she is said to have had seven youths,

³⁰⁵ AnS, p. 5.

³⁰⁶ Donncha Ó hAodha, 'The lament of the Old Woman of Beare' in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, ed. by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim R. McCone (Maigh Nuad, 1989), pp. 308-31.

³⁰⁷ Greene and O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury*, p. 7; Heinrich Wagner, 'Origins of Pagan Irish Religion', *ZCP* 38 (1981), 1-28: p. 6.

³⁰⁸ Ó hAodha, 'The Old Woman of Beare', p. 310.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 312.

outliving husband after husband, and she has so many grandsons and great grandsons. It is striking, though, that the foster-children are the first thing to be mentioned. They take on the burden of representing the Caillech's connection to all the people she has lost; to all the land that she sees flooded. Her lament appeals to a general sense of loss and her role as foster-mother contributes to this image. As discussed above, the foster-mother can open up the mourning experience.

The Caillech is also seen as a foster-mother elsewhere. Ó Cruallaoich has noted that she is mentioned in the twelfth-century version of The Expulsion of the Déssi under her earlier name Buí/Boí.³¹⁰ This tale demonstrates her continued popularity into the twelfth century and also shows her acting as a foster-mother. She takes in Conall Corc who is born of an incestuous union in order 'that the disgrace may not be [in Ireland]'.³¹¹ After she miraculously cures the stain on Corc she renegotiates his reconciliation with his grandmother.³¹² When the character appears outside the context of the poem, she is described as a foster-mother; when reference is made to her great age fosterage is also used. The Caillech's lament itself is a complex reflection on the impermanence of life. It has been variously interpreted as a woman's lament for her lost youth, the lament of the Corco Loígde for the over kingship, or a reflection on the impermanence of the phenomenal world compared to the afterlife.³¹³

Regardless of the interpretation, the children and foster-children of the Caillech do not feature in the poem. The loss is more general. What is interesting from our perspective is that the figure chosen to represent this loss is most often characterised as a foster-mother, although she is still a fecund mother. The role of

³¹⁰ Gearóid Ó Cruallaoich, 'Continuity and Adaptation in Legends of Cailleach Bhéarra', *Béaloideas* 56 (1988), 153-178: p. 155.

³¹¹ Vernam Hull, 'The later version of the expulsion of the Déssi', *ZCP* 27 (1958-59), 14-63: p. 53. Conall Corc is so called because he was born with a red (*corc*) mark on him that the hag washes away.

³¹² Eleanor Hull, 'Legends and Traditions of the Cailleach Bheara or Old Woman (Hag) of Beare', *Folklore* 38.3 (1927), 225-54: p. 230.

³¹³ Katja Ritari, 'Images of Ageing in the Early Irish Poem *Caillech Bérrí*', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 3 (2006), 57-70; John Carey, 'Transmutations of Immortality in "The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare"', *Celtica* 23 (1999), 30-7; Seán Ó Coileáin, 'The Structure of a Literary Cycle', *Ériu* 25 (1974), 88-125; B. K. Martin, 'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare: A Critical Evaluation', *Medium Aevum* 38 (1969), 245-61; Kuno Meyer, 'Stories and Songs from Irish MSS', *Otia Merseiana* 1 (1899), 119-28.

foster-mother, being not biologically tied to the foster-child, allows many different people to identify with her maternity. We have seen this before in the presentation of the Virgin Mary. In this section I have shown how the foster-mother can recreate the past, as she stands at the beginning of her charge's life. That she is chosen over the mother demonstrates the central role a foster-mother has in the emotional life of the medieval Irish.

2.5. The Death of Níall Noígíallach

When we are dealing with specific laments for named individuals, we can posit another reason for the use of foster-mother as mourner. The foster-mother is used as a figure of mourning because she has the closest connection to the early life of the deceased. We saw this in the case of Sadb and how the foster-mother is used to access the past. The chiasmic structure is central of the life of Níall Noígíallach. In the Middle Irish tale, *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, Níall is taken into fosterage by Torna Éces. When he begins to foster the young boy in the wilderness the text refers to the death that will befall Níall: 'This was well ... until he died in the afternoon on a Saturday by the Sea of Icht, slain by Eochaid son of Enna Cennselach'.³¹⁴ In a parallel fashion the foster-family return in the death tale of Níall. This narrative is preserved separately in *Orcuin Néill Noígíallaig*. The seven manuscript witnesses suggest that *Orcuin Néill* preserves two variant tales that work together. As Ní Mhaonaigh has pointed out 'taking both versions together, therefore, the tale consists of three basic parts: the background to the killing; the killing itself; the aftermath of the killing. Of these, only the second is common to all manuscript copies'.³¹⁵ In his edition, based on the earliest manuscript, Meyer said the prose tale can be 'hardly earlier than the eleventh century' and as such is roughly contemporaneous with the narrative of Níall's

³¹⁴ Stokes, 'Death of Crimthann', pp. 192-193.

³¹⁵ Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Níall Noígíallach's Death-Tale', in *Cín Chille Cúile: Texts, Saints and Places. Essays in Honour of Pádraig Ó Riain*, ed. by John Carey, Máire Herbert, and Kevin Murray (Aberystwyth, 2004), pp. 178-191: p. 183.

birth and fosterage, as well as sharing a manuscript with it.³¹⁶ I will focus on the poem spoken by Níall's foster-family. When Níall's body is returned to Ireland, Torna hears of the death and goes to see his foster-son. This visit provokes Tuirn, Torna's son and Níall's foster-brother, to recite a stanza, which is capped and exceeded by Níall's foster-mother:

A deóit, a beóil deirg,
nád con-tursaig fó chomfeirg,
a delb amail théthein tra
tairced Hérind ólachda.

His teeth, his red lips,
He does not strike under anger³¹⁷
His shape like a fiery blaze
Surmounting warlike Erinn.

Dath a grúaidi in cach mí
díamtar cóire cosmailsi,
sían, crú laeig (lích cen on),
foircle caille cétamun.

The colour of his cheeks in every month
was even and symmetrical,
like foxglove, like calf's blood – feast without flaw,
like the top-branches of a forest in May.

Amail éisce, amail gréin,
amail tenndáil taitnem Néill,
amail draic di thuind cen táir
Níall mac Echach Muigmedáin.

Like the moon, like the sun,
like a firebrand was Níall's splendour,
Like a dragon from a wave without fault,
Níall son of Eochaid Muigmedon.

Is ceól sírectach in se
gol cach cind la Cíarraige,
cummaid chumaid forn 'nar taig
do díth Néill húi Muiredaig.

This is a sorrowful song
a wail for everyone in Kerry,
It brings grief upon us in our house
the death of Níall, grandson of Muiredach

Ba mór subai, ba mór sáim
bith hi cóemthecht do daltáin,
ic mac Echach nirb ardis
do dáil in tan no théigmis.

Great was the delight, great the ease
to be in the company of my fosterling
with the son of Eochaid – no small thing!
Going to the gathering.³¹⁸

This poem and the attribution to Níall's foster-mother is found in the earliest manuscript, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 502.³¹⁹ In the Yellow Book of Lecan a much longer poem is preserved.³²⁰ This has similarities to the one given above, but is framed as a dialogue between Torna and Tuirn, Níall's foster-father and foster-brother. Meyer

³¹⁶ Kuno Meyer, 'Orgain Néill Noígiallaig', *Otia Merseiana* 2 (London, 1900-01), 84-92: p. 84.

³¹⁷ This translation is tentative at best. Meyer does not give a translation of this line.

³¹⁸ Meyer, 'Orgain Néill Noígiallaig', pp. 88, 91. I have adapted Meyer's translation where appropriate.

³¹⁹ Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 502, ff. 19-89.

³²⁰ Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318, cols. 573-958.

has provided an edition of this poem.³²¹ The choice to place the words in the mouth of the conversing father and son, or the mother alone is illustrative. The poems have been dated to the ninth century, earlier than the prose, pointing to the composite nature of such death tales and highlighting the active choices of speaker.³²² However the foster-mother's role has been overlooked in the past. Indeed, Meyer added a note stating that the last stanza was actually spoken by Torna, the foster-father.³²³ While this may seem logical, given his position as the chief poet of Ireland, there is nothing in the text which indicates that it should be spoken by Torna. Furthermore, Ní Mhaonaigh attributes the poem to Torna in her summary of the Rawlinson manuscript. Modern corrections demonstrate that the importance of the role of the foster-mother is often missed.

The recitation of a poem is not the only reaction to Níall's death. In the Rawlinson text all family members, foster-brother, foster-mother, and foster-father have a role to play. Unusually, though, the foster-father – the chief poet of Ireland – does not recite a poem. He dies on seeing his beloved foster-son dead, a reaction often repeated in medieval Irish literature. For example, in *Acallam na Senórach* Aed mac Muiredaig's foster-brothers threaten to die of grief.³²⁴ It is interesting that only the foster-father dies here. In other cases the foster-father recites poetry, while the foster-mother does not get to speak, but merely dies without saying a word.³²⁵ Here I suggest that because it is known that Torna raised Níall alone in the wilderness only his death will fulfil the structure; returning to the beginning of Níall's life at its end. Torna does not speak but Níall's foster-mother recites the longest lament. The poem recreates the dead king of Ireland through standard heroic language as outlined above. He is the prize of all Ireland and beautiful with it. It could be argued that some images are used to add a greater sense of death and transience than would be seen in panegyric. In particular, the comparison of the red cheeks to the blood of a calf is the same image as

³²¹ Kuno Meyer, 'Totenklage um König Niall Nóigiallach' in *Festschrift für Whitley Stokes zum siebzigsten Geburtstage*, ed. by Kuno Meyer and others (Leipzig, 1900), pp. 1-6.

³²² Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Níall Nóigiallach's Death-Tale', p. 187.

³²³ Meyer, 'Orgain Néill Nóigiallaig', p. 91.

³²⁴ AnS, p. 34.

³²⁵

is used to foreshadow the violent deaths to be found in *Longes Mac nUislenn*.³²⁶ The impression is furthered by the cheville of the beautiful body as feast for ravens.

Moving beyond the words of the mourning poem, the choice of the foster-mother to express them is striking. She does not have a role in the early life of Níall, unlike the efforts made by Torna to preserve the young child. While it may be presumed that there was a woman in the household of the poet who could care for the child, she is not mentioned. Even here at the peak of her narrative involvement she is the only unnamed member of the foster-family. The anonymous foster-mother, who dies of grief is a common figure in the *Dindsenchas*, and the anonymity in this text allows her to take on a more archetypal role.³²⁷ As for Níall's foster-brother, he opens the mourning with this stanza of his own. His stanza begins with the line that ends the foster-mother's poem: 'In tan no théigmis do dáil' 'When we used to go to the gathering'.³²⁸ The *dúnad* suggests that his stanza and the foster-mother's poem was a unified whole; one poem, parts of which have been given to different speakers. This suggests that the speakers were assigned when the poem was incorporated into the prose and their identity was a deliberate choice to include all the foster-family.

In the longer version of the poem on the death of Níall, it is Torna and his son Tuirn who are the principle mourners. The poem is structured as a dialogue, a common feature of lamentations. The records of more recent keening patterns highlight how mourning is not restricted to a principle mourner. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century the Halls recorded that 'The lamentation is not always confined to the keener; any one present who has "the gift" of poetry may put in his or her verse'.³²⁹ The dramatic nature of lamentation has been noted by Ziolkowski, discussing the *Planctus*: 'the lamentational clustering reminds us that although laments are often lyric they may be grouped in such a way as to be dramatised by dialogue'.³³⁰ So while we see that the

³²⁶ *Longes mac nUislenn*, ed. Hull, p. 45.

³²⁷ Stokes, 'Rennes *Dindsenchas*', passim.

³²⁸ Meyer, 'Orgain Néill Noígiallaig', p. 91.

³²⁹ S. C. Hall and others, *Ireland: its scenery and character* 3 vols. (London, 1841-43), I, p. 226.

³³⁰ Jan M. Ziolkowski, 'Laments for Lost Children: Latin Traditions', in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Jane Tolmie and M. J. Toswell (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 81-108; p. 100.

foster-mother does not have a privileged position for mourning, the whole foster-family does. The dialogue demonstrates the intergenerational connections made by fosterage. Although she often stands in for the foster-family, it is her role as fosterer that is important. The foster-mother is used to express the depth of emotion generated by the whole foster-family.

It has been noted before that the author of *Orgain Néill Noígíallaig* produced this text from a composite of many others. Traces of this composition were seen in the assignation of speakers in the lament. It is interesting to note how the *Dindsenchas* material on Ochan, another version of the death tale, treats the death of Níall. Here the presence of the foster-family is subsumed by the mourning masses. In the prose account it is said: ‘conid de ata Ochan mor muindtiri Neill airm ir-roscar cach o aroile 7 i n-arlaicit geill Erenn i suidiud’ ‘and a great lamentation of Níall’s household where each parted from the other and where the hostages of Erin were released’.³³¹ This is something that is mirrored in the metrical version. Although the fosterage element has been occluded in these narratives, we can see some similarities in the mourning. The metrical *Dindsenchas* refers to the physical element of breast beating (*iar baisse brón*) and the mourning is also characterised by separation.³³² The imagery of the body parting from the soul was noted in the beginning of *Acallam na Senórach* and separation more broadly understood, was most strikingly used as a reaction to Cú Chulainn’s child’s death, when calves were separated from their mothers.³³³

Elsewhere in the *Dindsenchas* material we see that connections between the foster-family are central to the mourning process. In an inverse of the pattern examined above, Lug holds mourning games for his dead foster-mother in the *Dindsenchas* for Tailtiu; in that for Mag Findabrach, Brech’s heart breaks at the death of his foster-mother, who, in her turn, has died of grief for her father.³³⁴ The tales about Druim Suamaich have the fosterers of Cormac Conn Loinges at the centre of the

³³¹ Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindsenchas’, *RC* 15, p. 296.

³³² *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, ed. and trans. by Edward J. Gwynn, 5 vols (Dublin, 1903-35), II, p. 38.

³³³ *AnS*, p. 2.

³³⁴ Stokes, ‘Rennes Dindsenchas’, *RC* 16, pp. 50, 70.

mourning process. In the tale, as told in the *Dindsenchas*, Suamach and his wife Caindlech follow their foster-son into the east. When they see the hostel he is staying at on fire they know that Cormac is dead and so themselves die on the spot: for this reason, Druim Suamaig and Ard Caindlech are so named. In some of the versions the deaths are stated quite baldly: 'Suamach died forthwith and Caindlech died on Ard Caindlech'.³³⁵ However in the metrical version Suamach is given a speaking part and Caindlech's grief is described in more detail. Suamach does not desire to live after his fosterling, in whom he has taken so much pride. Caindlech loosens her hair in a typical attitude of mourning. In his discussion of the symbolism of hair in the Middle Ages Bartlett says 'this letting down or loosing of the hair was a form of mourning exclusively the preserve of wives and widows'.³³⁶ This is a wide survey of the Middle Ages, but it is illustrative that the fosterage bond gave the Irish more, rich and varied relationships to employ.

These deaths are illuminating as the death of Caindlech is also told in *Togail Bruidne Da Choca*. This is the fuller version of Cormac's fateful journey into the east which culminates in his death and destruction for many of the Ulster exiles. Here his foster-mother does not die of grief but goes into battle alongside her foster-son and is killed in battle: 'Do-rochair Caindlech ingen Gaim Geltae hic Muine Cainndlige .i. muime Cormaic' 'Caindlech, daughter of Gaim Gelta, that is, Cormac's foster-mother, fell at Muine Cainnlighe'.³³⁷ While this is not the tender image we have come to expect, the presence of foster-family in battle, supporting the hero, is something we have seen for foster-fathers and -sons. Caindlech does not die of grief in this example but she is rendering the mutual support, expected of the foster-family. In this example, she gives support even to her death.

In this section I have examined, as a case study, the death tale of Níall

³³⁵ Ibid, pp. 81-82.

³³⁶ Robert Bartlett, 'Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 41 (1994), 43-60: p. 54.

³³⁷ *Bruiden Da Choca*, ed. Toner, pp. 116-17. The picture is slightly complicated in this tale as Medb and Aillil make a claim to be Cormac's foster-parents.

Noígíallach. This death tale, and accompanying lament, demonstrate some of the arguments I have been making in this chapter and challenging a number of assumptions. The adaptation of the poem, placed in the mouth of foster-father, foster-brother and foster-mother, shows that we cannot readily assume that foster-mothers have an exclusive relationship with mourning. Even so, their presence alone can change the emotional tenor of a tale. While the poem is not significantly altered, the dialogic virtuosity of Torna and Tuirn is replaced with more powerful grief from the anonymous foster-mother. Where *Orcuin Néill* seeks to involve the whole foster-family, in the *Dindsenchas* material we see the foster-mother standing in for that family. She stands at the emotional heart of the fostering experience, the synecdoche for all the affection given. Once more the figure of the foster-mother works to bring more people into the emotional experience, as the Virgin and Sadb do. That the foster-mother stands at the emotional heart of the early life of many medieval Irish characters, often makes her a more fitting mourner than the natural mother. In the next section we will see evidence of this in the poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe.

2.6. Teasda eochair ghlais Ghaedheal

We have seen how foster-mothers were used in mourning contexts to curate access to the past, to access the deceased. We have examined the cultural assumptions that lie behind the notion that foster-mothers and foster-families are best placed to evoke the dead. The dead are evoked through poetry, through expressions of emotion put into the voices of the foster-family. The situation is somewhat reversed for the Virgin's mourning. While, in some cases, we have heard the voices of the mourners, the Virgin is addressed and not allowed to speak herself. The final section of this chapter will examine a poem that addresses both the theme of access and that of representation of the dead. We have seen how foster-mothers control access to the past, to their dead fosterlings, while simultaneously allowing more people to

participate in mourning. The representation of this mourning has tended to the formulaic, whereas this section will address a poem unlike those previously examined as it is addressed to a five-year-old girl.

The central text of this final section is *Teasda eochair ghlais Gheadhael* by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe.³³⁸ The poem was written sometime before 1234 and is preserved in three manuscripts dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.³³⁹ The poem is addressed to Domhnall Mór Ó Domhnaill, one of the patrons of Giolla Brighde. It laments the death of Gormlaith daughter of Domhnall Mór who had been sent into fosterage with Domhnall son of Aodh Ó Néill. This is the political background against which we can analyse the emotional bonds described in the poem. Very few bardic poems take five-year-old girls as their topics, and the politics that lie behind its composition make this poem very much a product of the thirteenth century. By addressing both the themes of access and of representation together, I will show why Giolla Brighde made the foster-mother, an Ó Néill woman, the central figure in a poem about a dead Ó Domhnaill girl, addressed to her father.

The first aspect to be addressed is how the mourning is presented in this twenty-five-stanza poem. Given the conceit of the poem, as outlined in the opening line, we would expect to find repeated references to Gormlaith's fosterage. The poem begins 'teasta eochair ghlais Ghaoidheal' 'the key of the lock of the Irish is missing'. What is meant by this is made clear in the third stanza 'eochair síothchána Síol gCuinn/altrom inghine I Dhomhnuill' 'The fostering of the daughter of Ó Domhnaill was the key to the peace of the Offspring of Conn'. This first image highlights some of the concerns that we will see further on in the poem. Firstly, the notion of access is very much central to the way in which Giolla Brighde is presenting the mourning. We have seen how key imagery was used of the Virgin in *Buime trír*, yet the image here is slightly

³³⁸ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams, pp. 22-29; see also Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'Cú Chulainn, the poets, and Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe' in *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic Tradition. A Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, ed. by Joseph F. Nagy and Leslie Ellen Jones (Dublin, 2005), pp. 291-302.

³³⁹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B 514; Dublin, RIA, A iv 3; Dublin, National Library, G 167.

different. Throughout these opening stanzas the identification of Gormlaith shifts between the key and the lock. She was meant to close the doors of war. Her fosterage has an important political component that works alongside the emotional one.

The emotional heart of the poems comes in stanzas 15-17. Here the foster-mother's grief is most clearly expressed. The description of her grief is the most extended of Giolla Brighde's images and the only place in the poem in which we see an individual's reaction to the death. In his edition of the poem McKenna throws some ambiguity into the discussion: 'The lady whose grief is described in stanzas 15 onwards may have been Gormlaidh's [sic] foster-mother or mother (*buime* being used in either sense)'.³⁴⁰ McKenna's view demonstrates how contemporary assumptions about who would or should be mourning, can colour how these works are translated. In his view *muime* should be translated as mother since the mother should be the one to mourn. Yet we have seen in the Introduction and in this chapter's discussion of the Virgin, that such a translation is questionable.

Although this forms the emotional heart of the poem, the foster-mother remains anonymous. This is something that we have seen with Níall's foster-mother in *Orcuin Néill*: although she is carrying this emotional weight she remains anonymous. Giolla Brighde uses anonymity well in this poem. Gormlaith herself is not mentioned by name until the third stanza. Gormlaith's mother, when she is mentioned in stanza twenty-one is introduced with a periphrastic phrase which distances her from her daughter. Gormlaith is referred to as 'Inghean inghine Cathail' 'The daughter of the daughter of Cathal'.³⁴¹ This anonymity is central to how Giolla Brighde presents the lamentation. By using the foster-mother as the central focus for the mourning, the poet opens the loss beyond the natal family. This is an essential part of his purpose in this poem, that is to mourn the loss of peace that Gormlaith represented. Her loss is one that will be felt throughout Ireland.

Before investigating the wider impact of the death, I will concentrate on the

³⁴⁰ Lambert McKenna, 'Some Irish Bardic Poems: LXXXIV', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 36 (1947), 447-50: p. 447.

³⁴¹ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams, pp. 26-27.

mourning itself. The foster-mother's grief is described in very physical terms. Over the three stanzas in which she appears, the foster-mother is alternately crying and reminiscing. She beats her palms in that well-known gesture of grief and she seems unresponsive to music, the cries of children and sounds presaging danger. These three stanzas put what has, until this point, been abstracted into a physical realm. The physicality is especially important for Giolla Brighde, as he says in stanza twenty: 'ní gan a dhula ó dhuine/ní bhí acht cumha cholluidhe' 'there is nothing that does not leave a person except physical grief'.³⁴² This statement places the body in the centre of how grief is experienced: the only thing that remains is grief for the body of the child, in the body of the foster-mother. The experience is not the abstracted grief, represented by the circumlocution used of Gormlaith's mother who is distanced from her child, but the grief of the body that the foster-mother expresses.

The physicality can most clearly be seen in stanza sixteen:

Dealuchadh re dreich mballaigh
díoghlaídh ar a dearnannaibh;
Gormlaídh do bhreith ó a buime
bodhraidh dreich a dearnuinne

Her being parted from her freckled face,
she avenges upon her palms;
Gormlaith's separation from her fostermother
numbs the surface of her palm.³⁴³

The body is constantly referred to in this stanza and the two references to her two hands highlights the physicality of her grief. The boundaries between what is inside the poem and outside is are further blurred in this stanza. The word *bodhraidh*, translated by Williams as "numbs", is actually the word for "deafens".³⁴⁴ He sees this as a metaphor for depriving the palms of their senses and thus numbing them with constant beating. While there obviously must be some interpretive work done on this line, I suspect that once more we could be falling prey to modern ideas that very often cast grief as numbness. Rather could the striking of her palms against each other and on her breast be so violent and so loud that it would even deafen the palms of her

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ eDIL s.v. bodraid.

hands? Such imagery is not only in keeping with the poetic endeavour that plays with the aural of the medium, but it informs our understanding of the next stanza. Here the foster-mother is shown to be indifferent to all other noises. It begins with the pleasing sound of music which she does not hear, the chattering of a child which she does not complain about and she does not start at the rustling of leaves outside. Her indifference to the world now that Gormlaith is dead is framed through sound: the sounds of life, good and bad, do not move her because she is deafened by the sound of her palms beating in grief.

The focus on the aural is found in the first mention of the foster-mother. She is said to spend part of her day crying, part of it telling stories about the girl; as if to reinforce the special connection that they have, her role as foster-mother is repeated: 'what recollection would be more sorrowful to her foster-mother than the remembrance of her gaiety?'³⁴⁵ Recollection of how happy the child was, is the source of sorrow and as fitting a response to her death as crying. In this way emotion begets emotion, but it is the foster-mother who can recall Gormlaith's gaiety and not her mother. Once more the foster-mother functions as the guardian of memory. Yet, oddly any recollection like this is absent from the rest of our poem. While Giolla Brighde draws attention to the foster-mother's recollections, he himself does not participate. Once again, anonymity is used, in the figure of the foster-mother, to generalise this grief. The grief comes from the emotional heart of the poem, from the foster-mother.

However, we must be wary of ascribing heartfelt emotion to the very considered art-form that is bardic poetry. The concentration on the loss is even more marked here, as we are considering the death of a five-year-old child. The lament for Gormlaith, referred to specifically as a *marbnaith*, or death-poem, in one of the manuscripts, has been described by Williams as 'a moving poem' and Ní Dhonnchadha says 'The poem offers no consolation. It tells rather of inconsolable grief and irretrievable loss'.³⁴⁶ This latter opinion, that the poem is one long cry at a loss, could

³⁴⁵ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams, p. 27.

³⁴⁶ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams p. 263; Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Courts and Coteries I (c. 900-1600)' in *The Field Day Anthology*, ed. Bourke, IV, pp. 293-340: p. 308.

be affected by the fact that as a five-year-old girl, Gormlaith cannot be mourned in the traditional manner of kings and warriors. She was no prop in battle. The one traditional adult attribute that could be used, her beauty, is not placed at the forefront of the lament either. That she is not a typical subject of such a poem, allows us to see how grief is represented without the traditional praiseworthy epithets we saw in the death of Níall.

It is mentioned once in stanza fourteen 'Baladh na n-ubhall n-abuidh ar an uichtghil n-abhradhuibh' 'The perfume of ripe apples was upon the white-breasted, dark-browed child'.³⁴⁷ The appeal to other senses, smell as well as sight, does more to recreate the dead child, in the same way that Cáma more fully recreates the lost life the *fián*. Yet this is not wholly based on verisimilitude. The point of this praise of her beauty is made clear when we include the second half of the stanza 'fríoth fios balaidh an bhrogha ar slios galair Gormladha' 'one could smell the aroma of the heavenly palace upon the diseased body of Gormlaith'.³⁴⁸ Her diseased body is redolent of Heaven, to which she is ascending; her beauty is like that of saints, not tied to this world but a pointer to the next, derived from her purity of soul. Her beauty is tied to her role as a child, according to the view of children as innocents before they reach sexual maturity and that age when sex becomes a temptation. Indeed, her sexual immaturity is referred to elsewhere since 'nír thuill osnadh inghine' 'she never earned the sighs for a daughter' the use of *ingen* here is as an age marker, contrasting with *macámh mná* in the line above.³⁴⁹ The implication here is that she has not entered that sexually mature stage of life that would cause people to sigh about her or her mother to sigh over her. Even in the formulaic eulogy of her beauty, we see that there is little to directly eulogise about Gormlaith. As a girl who has not ascended into womanhood, in what ways is she valued by contemporary Irish society? Is this the reason why we think the poem is a sincerer outpouring of emotion? Is it a misreading of what is a difficult subject to address in bardic poetry?

³⁴⁷ *The Poems of Giolla Birghde*, ed. Williams, pp. 24-25.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

I suggest that the image of Gormlaith is employed to further Giolla Brighde's political ends.³⁵⁰ As well as Gormlaith, the figure of the anonymous foster-mother, who draws more people into the mourning process, is useful for him. Here I will briefly address how Gormlaith represents a frustrated future which makes her loss even more striking. The fact that her personality is occluded by her symbolic value can be seen in how she is often referred to as an inanimate object, for example key, yoke, apple, seed and sapling. Of course, such imagery is a common feature of praise poetry but it is particularly marked here. Nowhere do we get a sense of the child, not even a physical description. Rather the main conceit and *dúnad* of the poem is her role as 'the key to the lock of the Irish'. Indeed so odd is this approach to the modern ear, and again we can see the abutting of twenty-first and thirteenth-century ideas about children, that in Seamus Deane's translation in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* he has shifted the title/opening line to 'All Ireland is in mourning'.³⁵¹ But for Giolla Brighde her main role is as a descendant of all the main kindreds of Gaelic Ireland: 'The Race of Conall and the Race of Eoghan who saw her flourish, the Kindred of Brian and the Kindred of Conchobhar, every Irishman is a flower for Gormlaith; all are eager to lament her together (*comhchaoineadh*)'.³⁵² In this way she is the physical embodiment of unity among the disparate Irish. The idea of a physical embodiment of unity is central to the reason she is so mourned: she is not only a descendant of all Ireland but as a child she is a figure of future unity, a point in time moving from past division to future cooperation.

In his book *No Future* Lee Edelman investigates how the idea of The Child lies behind all our political discourse. He says: 'For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains

³⁵⁰ Interestingly in another poem, *Do-fhidir Dia Cinéal Conaill*, Giolla Brighde uses the story of Conall Gulbain for his political ends. Once more fosterage ties can be used for political ends. See Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Annals, Histories, and Stories: Some Thirteenth-Century Entries in the Annals of the Four Masters', in *Ollam: Studies in Gaelic and Related Traditions in Honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, ed. by Matthieu Boyd (Lanham, MD, 2016), pp. 101-116: pp. 111-12.

³⁵¹ Seamus Deane, 'All Ireland is Mourning', in *The Field Day Anthology*, ed. Bourke, IV, pp. 308-311.

³⁵² *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams, pp. 24-25.

at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention'.³⁵³ I suggest that this is as true for the hopes and fears of our thirteenth-century Irish audience as it is for modern politics. But in our poem, the child, Gormlaith, would not only be the beneficiary of the new, peaceful world but a representation and guarantor of it. She takes on these roles because the child, insofar as it exists in the future, only really exists in the imagination.³⁵⁴ The messy reality of children precludes them from carrying ideological weight and real children are children only for a short while and they, in turn, start forming their own notions of what The Child should be and expect.

In this way the dead Gormlaith is ideal for Giolla Brighde's purposes: she is more real than abstract talk of "blood", "sons" and "people" in his poem *Caidhead ceithre teallaigh Teamhra*, a poem in which he makes the case for unity under Domhnall Mór Ó Domhnaill: 'Rí for a uaisle d'fhuil Conaill/ar Chloinn Eoghain do budh fháth;/don fhior is só ar méad a mhuirne,/créad nach dó budh cuibhdhe cách?' 'A king of the blood of Conall ruling over the Sons of Eoghan by virtue of his nobility, would be a wise notion; why would not all people be more fitting subjects to a man junior in rank if he enjoyed such great popularity?'³⁵⁵ Yet, at the same time, she is freed from this mortal coil to enter the realm of abstraction and ideas. She is connected to the ideal future throughout the poem. In stanza seven: 'tearc adhbhar ríoghna nó ríogh/gan íorna adhbhal d'imshníomh' 'there are few future queens or kings without a huge tangle of grief'. In this she is not only mourned by the families she has left behind, but she is part of the community of the future. We have already mentioned the line in which she is said to have the "perfume of the ripe apples" and towards the end of the poem the apple, and seed imagery more generally, returns: 'The apple of the apple-tree

³⁵³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, 2004), p. 11.

³⁵⁴ The way children can carry ideological is also linked to their importance when discussing dynastic considerations.

³⁵⁵ *The Poems of Giolla Brighde*, ed. Williams, pp. 16-17.

of Cruachain of Conn is under the dark-red earth of Doire of Colum, a fair guest in the soil of Doire, a berry of the branch of Brian Bóroimhe'. She is the frustrated final culmination of the work of her ancestors, as in this stanza Giolla Brighde again recalls the people to whom she is related. It is telling that in describing the smell of her diseased body the apples are 'ripe'; she is the timely and expected culmination that is frustrated by disease.

The child is connected to those outside her blood family by fosterage. Fosterage is the means by which the doors of war can be closed, people who have no immediate emotional connection to one another can forge one, and families can be united. The foster-mother, who is described over three stanzas at the heart of the poem, is the figure through which others can mourn the dead child. Others who are not Ó Domhnaill or Ó Néill. The foster-mother is chosen as the figure to take on this role for a number of reasons. The anonymous foster-mother has the greatest emotional connection to the child. Yet her personal loss can be spread wider, to the loss all Ireland will feel now that the hope for unity has been lost. The child is important, but her importance is framed in terms of the relationship she has with her foster-mother. The relationship is marked by a deep emotional connection, as expressed in the stanzas describing the foster-mother's loss.

2.7. Conclusion

My thesis is concerned with recreating the emotional community of fosterage in medieval Ireland, the expectations of how a foster-family should interact. In this chapter, I have addressed foster-mothers and their relationship with their fosterlings. As with all the chapters in this thesis, space prevents me from taking an exhaustive survey. The element of the relationship I have focussed on here is how the foster-mother reacts to death and mourning. If the chapter had to be rephrased as a question, I would be seeking why the foster-mother is chosen, in so many instances, as the appropriate vehicle for mourning? The answer to that question allows us to see

something about the process of mourning, as depicted in medieval Irish literature, but it also provides evidence for the assumption that the foster-mother was at the emotional heart of the foster-family.

Something of this idea is found in the false etymology of *muime* given in *Cáin Lánamna*: ‘she does more concerning him than the foster-father i.e. warming him and clothing him and nursing him, or she does [things] concerning him sooner than every person’.³⁵⁶ I have shown in chapter one that foster-mothers, as well as foster-fathers, can intervene on the part of their fosterlings. More so than the foster-father, the foster-mother’s relationship is centred around the nursing and care she gives. This focus is reflected in the prominence of breast imagery in the depictions of mourning above. Care of the dead is directly related to the nursing that has been given him. The same imagery is even used by the biological mothers of the Massacre of the Innocents. The emotional role of mother and foster-mother are not so distinct.

Foster-mothers relate to the death of their fosterlings in several ways. In some of the more extravagant examples we see foster-mothers moved to death by the death of their fosterlings. In the case of *Togail Bruidne Da Choca* his foster-mother is even said to come and fight at the side of her foster-son, although in the *Dindsenchas* material she takes on the more usual role of heart-broken mourner. Yet the reactions are not always so final. As one would expect, given the tradition of keening, poems are the means by which death is commemorated. The death of Níall shows us that the choice of speaker is important. What is said is often of less consequence than who is thought to have the emotional authority to say it. In many cases this emotional authority still comes from the foster-family but from foster-fathers and foster-siblings. We must not have too restricted a view on the appropriate gender for mourning,

That is not to say that poetic utterances are unworthy of extended discussion. By closely examining Giolla Brighde’s use of the image of the foster-mother, we can see the central role of this figure. Her central role highlights the grief felt over the

³⁵⁶ *Cáin Lánamna*, ed. Eska, p. 97.

untimely death of a five-year-old girl, *pace* Ariès.³⁵⁷ Moreover, her anonymity and the fact that she represents loss for all those outside the natal family, works for Giolla Brighde's wider point about Gaelic unity in the face of the Anglo-Normans. This aspect of the foster-mother, one who is deeply connected to others, but not by biological necessity, is central to the characterisation of her relationships. The tutelary role of the foster-mother can be seen in the person of the Virgin Mary. She takes on the role of foster-mother to explain her human love for her son, as well as the salvific love she shows to the human race. Sadb, in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, also combines the roles of mother and foster-mother. She does so to become the archetype of loss, since she has lost many loved ones on either side of the conflict. The figure of the Caillech laments a lost world, one that her many fosterlings will not see, while Giolla Brighde uses Gormlaith's foster-mother to lament a different lost future. Cáma is the foster-mother of Finn but stands in a tutelary role to the whole of the *ffian*. She provides a space for the *ffian* to contemplate their lost life. In all these examples the foster-mothers guard the memory of the past, because they have such a central role in that past. They are the nurturers to whom the fosterling is so attached.

The attachment between the fosterlings and their foster-mother is demonstrated most forcefully at the period of mourning. That is why I have focussed on such a point of crisis: in dealing with loss, the deepest emotional ties are put on display. The past, present, and future come together to show us those things that transcend the temporal bounds. What is striking is that foster-relationship transcends those bounds. Although it has a temporal frame, of sorts, in the laws, what we see here is fosterage used to access the past and to think about the future. Foster-motherhood is shown to be more emotionally invested than birth motherhood, in Giolla Brighde's poem and in the treatment of the children of Derbrenn. The figure of the mourning foster-mother gives us access to the emotional expectations that surround the foster-mother and how those emotions were put to use.

³⁵⁷ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (New York, 1962), p. 128.

3. What Makes a Foster-Sibling?

3.1. Introduction

We have considered the emotional life of the foster-parents and their fosterlings. I will now turn to the emotional life created between the foster-siblings themselves. The emotional bond formed between foster-siblings was a famously strong one, closer even than that of blood kin. The strength of the bond has led to censure from outside, with Gerald of Wales famously declaring ‘Woe to brothers among a barbarous people! Woe to kinsmen! ... If this people has any love or loyalty it is kept only for foster-children and foster-brothers’.³⁵⁸ For Gerald, the greater concern for foster-siblings than blood siblings seems a great affront to the natural order. He was, of course, writing from a very partisan viewpoint, to present the Irish as barbarous and naturally deserving of the subjugation imposed upon them. However, in this case his comments seem to be consonant with the picture of foster-brotherhood presented in Irish sources. This quotation also highlights how foster-brotherhood and natal brotherhood were thought to exist in a state of conflict. As hinted at in the preceding chapter, we cannot fully reconstruct the emotional community of fosterage without being aware of the emotional community of the blood family.

Of all the fosterage ties, the foster-sibling bond – specifically foster-brother – has been studied the most. Instead of outlining, once more, the ties of loyalty among foster-brothers, upheld or brought to a tragic end, I will ask a more fundamental question: what makes a foster-sibling? To some extent the definitional problem is a concern throughout the thesis. Foster-siblings provide the best way to access this question as they demonstrate the broadest use of fosterage vocabulary. It would, at first glance, appear to be a rather straightforward question to answer. I have discussed the

³⁵⁸ *Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, ed. by John S. Brewer and others, 8 vols (London, 1861-91), VI: *Itinerarium Kambriae et Descriptio Kambriae*, ed. by James F. Dimock (1868) pp. 167-8.

legal definition of fosterage in the Introduction, but the legal texts' primary concern is with the relationship between foster-father and fosterling. Certain things must be provided for the young charge and the foster-father is legally responsible for the behaviour of the child.³⁵⁹ The texts are less forthcoming on the subject of foster-siblings. There is one reference in the *Díre* text that states if a man is killed a fine must be paid to his foster-brother, but only if that were 'a foster-brother of the same blanket and of the same cup and of the same bed'.³⁶⁰ This gives a legal reflex of the widely held assumption about foster-siblinghood: that being raised alongside one another, in the same house, would create the strong emotional bonds that would last well beyond the scope of the fosterage itself. Such a bond could be formed without the legal ties and in this chapter I will investigate those examples of the bond. Bonds formed without recourse to a fosterage fee, sometimes later in the lives of the participants, but that are still considered fosterage, with all the emotional consideration that entails.

I will begin this chapter with another look at that character whose narrative density draws all themes to him: Cú Chulainn. I have examined, in the first chapter, how he accrues a large number of foster-fathers. So too, he accrues foster-brothers. In his narratives Cú Chulainn demonstrates the two ways foster-sibling relationships were constructed. These are, broadly, nutritive and educational. I will begin by addressing the nutritive foster-brother bond, since it is played out over a longer period. He is raised at the same blanket, cup, and bed as Conall Cernach. This is the foster-brother as understood in the law texts. Interestingly, Conall Cernach is present at the beginning and end of Cú Chulainn's life, but is surprisingly absent from the middle, the action of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. In the *Táin* many of Cú Chulainn's other foster-brothers appear, but appear as his enemies. Boll has addressed how the emotionally charged fosterage bond was used in narratives as a source of conflict.³⁶¹ I am interested in how these fosterage bonds were created in the first place. The foster-brothers in the *Táin* are not the sons of Finnochóem; they do not form part of the foster-family

³⁵⁹ CIH 1761-62; CIH 440.8.

³⁶⁰ CIH 439.15-8.

³⁶¹ Boll, 'Fosterkin in Conflict', *passim*.

alongside Conall Cernach. They come from different families and their bond is forged later in life, while learning with Scáthach. They represent the second way the foster-sibling bond was created, through a shared education.

One might suggest that this fosterage bond would carry less emotional weight, since it was created later in life, with less physical proximity, and less time to mature. Yet this is how the foster-brotherhood was created between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad, one of the most emotionally charged foster relationships in the literature. Their relationship ends in a climactic conflict at the heart of the *Táin*. The scene of betrayal, faithfulness, and tragedy hinges on their shared fosterage and the close bond that was created through their time together, studying with Scáthach. The great tragedy of this broken bond is depicted in moving speech and poetry. I will analyse how such a strong bond can be created in the supposedly drier conditions of education, rather than within a fictive family. More than this, however, I suggest that the presentation of their relationship, as ideal in the past but in the narrative present deteriorating, is a comment on the way fictional foster-brother relationships contrast with lived experience.

For the warriors in the *Táin* the shared education is the martial one, received at the knee of Scáthach. Yet there are many other kinds of education to be had. Even Cú Chulainn, is said to have learnt ‘fair speech’ alongside his unnamed foster-sister.³⁶² The deep, emotional bond is not the sole preserve of homosocial warriors, but the education that can unite foster-siblings is gendered. Beyond martial prowess, the saints’ lives, show that the ties formed during religious education can be expressed in fostering language. However, where the vertical expression of that language can be found throughout saints’ lives, I will show that the horizontal bonds of foster-brother and -sister are much less common. There is more interest in who is subservient to whom, a relationship that can more easily be expressed as that of teacher to pupil and foster-father to foster-son. Yet, for all intents and purposes, many of these saints are in a horizontal relationship to one another, they are coeval, undergoing the same education. How does the language of foster-siblinghood slip into that of foster-

³⁶² CCC, p. 48.

fatherhood? This question is also taken up in some of the secular tales, most notably *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Here, we see how the tensions and power struggles between foster-siblings can be expressed through the language of education and foster-parenthood.

In the final section I will address the emotional life described in the examples of unusual uses of foster language: calling foster-brothers foster-fathers; calling those not in a foster-relationship foster-siblings; and so on. I will focus my investigation on the *fiannaigecht* material. The young men of the *fián* of Ireland stand in an unusual relationship to the practice of fosterage. In the words of McCone 'It thus appears that for many males of free birth in early Ireland the termination of fosterage around fourteen years of age was followed by a stage in the *fián*'.³⁶³ If fosterage is over by the time they have entered this new stage of life, why should the language of fosterage be as prevalent as it is? In answering this question, and the related one of the vagueness with which the fosterage categories are applied, we return to the themes outlined earlier in the chapter. The *fián* are a band of like-minded individuals, who are still learning skills: poetry, hunting and warfare. Such a training recalls the shared education Cú Chulainn and his fellows received in Alba, under the masculine foster-mother Scáthach. Within the *fián* the shifting foster language describes shifting power relationships.

I ask the question of who was a foster-sibling, in order to access the emotional contours of that relationship. In the first place, it will show how foster-siblings are made; what is the emotional basis for the relationship. Beginning with Cú Chulainn we see some of the more straightforward ways that a foster-sibling can be made. Sharing the breast of the foster-mother and house of the foster-family brings siblings together. This closeness can exist without the specifically nurturing element. A shared learning can bring foster-brothers together. When we move from this to the changeable nature of fosterage language among foster-siblings, we can map emotional changes within the relationship. The changes encompass shifts in power between

³⁶³ McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fianna*', p. 13.

foster-siblings; the conflicting or complementary roles of foster and blood siblings; and the extension of the emotional force of foster-siblinghood, to those who are not legally foster-siblings. In this way, answering a seemingly obvious question of who was a foster-sibling will draw out the nuances of that emotional relationship.

3.2. Cú Chulainn's Foster-brothers

In this section I will look at the representation of Cú Chulainn's relationship with his foster-brothers. Previous scholarship has concentrated on the conflicting loyalties demonstrated in Cú Chulainn's battles with his foster-brothers. Although conflict is the main focus of Cú Chulainn's actions throughout the *Táin*, my focus will be on why these different men, and in one case woman, are described as his fosterlings. The sheer numbers of foster-siblings presented to us raises questions of its own. The many foster-brothers he ends up fighting are those he made while training with Scáthach. Although having an excessively large foster-family is a symptom of Cú Chulainn's uniquely excessive character, the educational way the foster-brotherhood was formed, allows for more foster-brother relationships. Such foster-brotherhood is characterised by emotional ties, created through the shared experience of education.

However, I will begin this section with a discussion of the nutritive model. We saw in the first chapter that among the great number of foster-parents attributed to Cú Chulainn there was only one foster-mother. The sole foster-mother is matched by a single foster-brother, Finnchoem's natal son Conall Cernach. His role as foster-brother is made clear in the three accounts of the early fostering of Cú Chulainn examined in chapter one: *Compert Con Chulainn*, *Feis Tighe Becfholtaig*, and *Tochmarc Emire*.³⁶⁴ What is interesting to note is that, in all of these examples, Conall Cernach's association with Cú Chulainn comes through his mother. In *Compert Con Chulainn* the association comes from juxtaposition. At the end of the list of Cú Chulainn's foster-

³⁶⁴ CCC, pp. 3-8, 16-68; FTB, pp. 500-504; Meyer, *Tochmarc Emire*, pp. 433-457.

fathers, we have a description of the family unit with which he will be most associated: ‘Amorgen will be his foster-father. Conall Cernach will be his foster-brother. The breasts of Finnchóem will be as the two breasts of his mother (*dí cích máthar cích Finnchóeme*)’.³⁶⁵

What is interesting about this phraseology is the shift that comes with Finnchóem. Where Conall and Amorgen fulfil a role, Finnchóem is more actively supplying her breasts to Cú Chulainn, as she has done for Conall. She has become the maternal figure, something that mirrors the close connection between foster-mothers and mothers we saw in the previous chapter. By highlighting her role in this way, Finnchóem becomes the centre of this new foster-family. Where the previously mentioned heroes of Ulster are described as providing something for the young Cú Chulainn, Amorgen and his family are present to fulfil the role of foster-family, father, brother or sibling, and mother. It is from the nutritive association with Conall’s family that he and Cú Chulainn are made foster-brothers. This is more explicitly expressed by Cú Chulainn when he describes his early life to Emer in *Tochmarc Emire*: ‘Finnchóem has cared for me so that Conall Cernach the victorious is my equally vigorous foster-brother (*comaltae comlúid*)’.³⁶⁶ The use of the conjunction *conid* places the causal link between Finnchóem nursing of Cú Chulainn and the fact that Conall Cernach is his foster-brother.

A similar approach is seen beyond the Cú Chulainn narratives, in the early fosterage of Lugaid Mac Con in Munster and the fosterage of Máel Dúin.³⁶⁷ In both examples their foster-sibling relationships are quickly established through the shared access to the quasi-maternal breast. In the case Lugaid in *Cath Maige Mucrama* it is described as follows: ‘Now Lugaid Mac Con of the Corco Loígde was foster-son (*dalta*) to Ailill and Sadb. He and Éogan son of Ailill were nursed on the one knee and at the

³⁶⁵ CCC, p. 8.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 30.

³⁶⁷ See Appendix 2 for genealogy.

one breast (*óenchích ro alta*).³⁶⁸ While the two boys are closely linked in their shared rearing, the emphasis in this introductory passage is on vertical relationships. Foster-brotherhood is not mentioned, but Mac Con is said to be the fosterling of Ailill and Sadb. The tensions between blood and foster relationships emerge in this passage. The natal family of Ailill, Sadb and Eogan is introduced alongside Lugaid simultaneously to highlight the shared physicality between the foster-brothers and the fact that Lugaid is not related by blood. He is introduced as of the Corco Loígde; that is his blood tie but the family that matters is his foster-family. This family is centred on foster-parental relationships and the foster-brotherhood is not mentioned until Eogan and Mac Con come across the magical musician Fer Fí. The competition to possess this musician leads to the bloody discord between those two. Their supposedly close connection is invoked at a time in which it begins to fall apart, which runs counter to our usual expectations of the foster-brother bond. The intimacy established by the shared nurturing and physical proximity is placed in ironic juxtaposition to the eventual deterioration of foster relationships.

The nutritive bond between foster-siblings is important for Máel Dúin in *Immram curaig Máile Dúin*.³⁶⁹ The fosterage that opens this tale is slightly different from other examples of fosterage. Máel Dúin was born as the result of rape perpetrated on a nun. After she gave birth to Máel Dúin he was given in secret to her friend the queen, who reared the boy and made it known that she was his mother. Although the tale constantly refers to the queen as the *muime* of Máel Dúin, the layer of deception involved in this tale means that we may have to treat the fosterage slightly differently. As the queen takes on the role of mother, could this be a case of adoption? Adoption is distinct from fosterage as it is the means by which a non-kinsman can be brought into the kin group, unlike fosterage where the fostered boy or girl remains part of their

³⁶⁸ CMM, pp. 38-9. The division of the sites of rearing into 'knee' and 'breast' could hint at male and female aspects of rearing. See chapter 1 for a discussion of the knee as a site of fosterage.

³⁶⁹ *The Voyage of Máel Dúin. A Study in Early Irish Voyage Literature Followed by an Edition of Immram Curaig Máile Dúin from the YBL in TCD*, ed. Hans P. A. Oskamp (Groningen, 1970), pp. 100-03.

original kin – even if the foster-family gains certain legal powers over them. The focus of adoption is on inheritance. Charles-Edwards has noted three cases of adoption in Irish law: taking in a man whose kinship is doubtful; the creation of *fine thacair* ‘kin by summons’ – what we would think of as adoption proper; and the recognition of a child born to maternal kindred with a foreign father.³⁷⁰

What we see from these examples is the importance of adoption to the kin as a wider unit. Its purpose is to bring other competent adults into the fold, rather than taking a child into a nuclear family, in the way we think of adoption now.³⁷¹ That Máel Dúin imagines himself to be the full son of the queen who raised him, muddies the waters. The close emotional tie that his assumption is based on, moves the discussion away from adoption to a confusion of identity that arises from fosterage. *Immram curaig Maíle Dúin* is not the only tale in which the young charge confuses their foster-mother for their blood mother.³⁷² That this is a common enough plot point, suggests there is a precedent for such confusion in the eyes of a young child. The confusion arises from the intimate relationship between the young child and foster-mother, a very different picture from what we have seen of adoption. I would suggest, albeit very hesitantly, that this is a literary reflection of a social reality in which the foster-mother was mistaken for the real mother. Such speculation, though, moves us from the consideration of Máel Dúin’s interaction with his foster-brothers.

The phrase used to describe the close relationship between Máel Dúin and the natal sons of the queen is very similar to that used in *Cath Maige Mucrama*: ‘Ro alt aicce íarom áen muime les 7 la tri maic fen 7 meic an righ a n-aencliab 7 foro aencich 7 áenglun’ ‘Now the one foster-mother reared him and the king’s three sons, in one cradle, and on one breast, and on one lap’.³⁷³ The queen is made the centre of the early lives of the four boys and it is through her that they form their bond. What is

³⁷⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, pp. 73-5.

³⁷¹ Adoption in the medieval period is usually ratified by a contract signed by all parties. Thus in most cases the adoptee will be old enough to have some legal standing in the eyes of the law (Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 105). See also Jaski’s comments on the *mac fóesma* (Jaski, ‘Gormac and dalta’, p. 5 ff.)

³⁷² See below p. 158.

³⁷³ *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, ed. Oskamp, pp. 102-03.

interesting in this version of the phrase, as opposed to the one from *Cath Maige Mucrama*, is the inclusion of the cradle as a site of unity. The introduction of the non-human element links the four boys in a way that does not involve the foster-parent, through their shared bed. It is not only the nursing that they receive from the queen, or the education that they receive from the lap (or knee in the YBL version) but the physical proximity with one another that links them.

Although the foster-parents are important, the foster-siblings themselves have a role in creating the emotional ties. This might seem like an obvious point to make, but it is worth noting that up to this point – and, indeed, throughout much of the following discussion – the foster-sibling bond is created via the vertical relationship of child to parent. The intimate connection between the foster-siblings is a passive result of the action of the parents taking in the child. This can be seen in the way Conall is presented as an addendum to the actions of his parents – his role as foster-brother is only ever mentioned in relation to his parents' roles in fostering Cú Chulainn. For example, in *Tochmarc Emire* it is Finnchóem who is given the active verb that creates Conall's persona.³⁷⁴ The nurturing role is central to the creation of the foster-family, but I hope to describe some ways in which the bond is an active one, created horizontally by the foster-siblings as they share the same cradle, the same living space.

The role of Conall Cernach as foster-brother of Cú Chulainn is more fully developed outside the conception narratives. While he is given a very passive role in their early lives, Conall Cernach is more active in the tale describing the death of Cú Chulainn, *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*. Here he acts as a loyal foster-brother should, avenging the death of Cú Chulainn. This more active role allows us to see how foster-brother bond can be created horizontally. In Kimpton's linguistic analysis the 'text presents a late ninth- or tenth-century reworking of an early eighth-century composition with later scribal modernisations'.³⁷⁵ The story tells of the final battle of Cú Chulainn, his death, and the revenge that Conall Cernach takes on Cú Chulainn's

³⁷⁴ CCC, p. 30.

³⁷⁵ *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, p. 9.

killers. Revenge is the driving force in this tale; the killers of Cú Chulainn are motivated by his own killing of their relatives, and they in their turn are killed by Conall Cernach. The foster-brother bond is called upon to fulfil the duty of revenge. When he begins his quest for retribution Conall says: 'It is Lugaid mac Con Ruí son of Dáire who has slain my foster-brother (*mo chomalt-sa*), Cú Chulainn'.³⁷⁶ This would seem to be a straightforward expression of the duties which result from the foster-sibling bond, as seen when Máel Fothartaig's foster-brothers avenge his unjust death at the hands of his own father.³⁷⁷ It is said that one of the four blameless killings is 'avenging the foster-son of the kin'.³⁷⁸ Yet, when Conall goes out to fulfil his duty of revenge and when the details of that duty are outlined, foster language is surprisingly absent.

When Conall goes on the trail of Cú Chulainn's killers, it is said, 'There was, then, a comrade's covenant (*cinniud tria chombáig*) between Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach, that is, whoever of them were to be killed first would be avenged by the other (*día chéiliu*)'.³⁷⁹ Here fosterage is not mentioned and the vow to avenge one another's deaths is described as a special compact. This view of the foster-sibling bond, as a compact or explicitly articulated tie, is one Larrington uses when discussing Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad. In her reading they act more like blood- or sworn-brothers.³⁸⁰ Conall and Cú Chulainn are foster-brothers, which forms the emotional basis for their duty to one another, but they make a special compact to avenge the other's death. That they did so demonstrates how foster-brotherhood overlaps with other societal structures, such as sworn bonds. When Conall calls out Lugaid he says: 'You owe me for the slaying of my comrade (*mo chomchéili*), Cú Chulainn'.³⁸¹ Here it is the warrior's bond that both heroes share, as part of the war band of Ulster, that links the two and motivates Conall's quest for vengeance. He does not recall their sharing of a breast, and

³⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 25, 44.

³⁷⁷ *Fingal Rónáin*, ed. Greene, pp. 8-9.

³⁷⁸ CIH 2014.3-18; Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 89.

³⁷⁹ *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, pp. 25, 44.

³⁸⁰ Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, pp. 223-27.

³⁸¹ *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, pp. 26, 45.

youth growing in each other's company. What is more important is the bond that they have created through shared adult experience. Fosterage is a start but not the whole explanation of their affection. Later experiences as warriors is also part of the emotional landscape, as seen in Cú Chulainn's encounters with his foster-brothers throughout the *Táin*.

Conall Cernach's role in the *Táin* troubles the image of the dutiful foster-brother. In short, he is conspicuously absent during the action of the *Táin*. There is some discussion in medieval Irish texts about his supposed whereabouts, either in Ulster or with the exiles, but for our purposes his lack of presence sees him drop out of the foster-brother role.³⁸² Furthermore, this is not the only text in which Conall Cernach does not fulfil his expected role as Cú Chulainn's foster-brother. It is not a problem as such, but given the remarkably intertextual nature of the Ulster Cycle tales, it is worth examining those instances in which foster-brotherhood is *not* used to mark their relationship. They appear together as two of the three competing rivals in *Fled Bricreann*. However, throughout the tale, although the two are constantly compared to one another, their foster-brotherhood is not mentioned. This could be to highlight the unparalleled nature of Cú Chulainn's excellence by removing any hint of a peer. In *Fled Bricreann* Medb gives him the priority: 'for, in regard to fame, bravery and valour, to distinction, youth and glory, the men of Ireland acknowledge your superiority',³⁸³ whereas in the *Táin* Cú Chulainn is afraid of his foster-brothers because: 'I shall not survive this encounter. We are of equal age, of equal swiftness, of equal stature, joining in combat'.³⁸⁴ The presence of foster-brothers is the presence of equals, something that the author of *Fled Bricreann* does not want for Cú Chulainn. Of course, this reading sits alongside an appreciation that the texts need not necessarily be connected. Not presenting Conall as a foster-brother could merely represent a divergent tradition.

As well as Conall Cernach, some of the foster-brothers in the *Táin* are described as the same age as Cú Chulainn. The above quotation from recension I highlights that

³⁸² *Táin Bó Fraích*, ed. by Wolfgang Meid (Dublin, 1974), p. 15.

³⁸³ *Fled Bricrend*, ed. Henderson, pp. 78-9.

³⁸⁴ *TBC* 1, pp. 54, 174.

Cú Chulainn and Fer Báeth are *comaís*, ‘of the same age’, an adjective that comes in a long list of words linked by the *co-* prefix. As we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, usually fosterage begins at a young age.³⁸⁵ The demands of nursing could lead to an age gap between foster-siblings, as any nursing of another’s child would usually occur after the nurse’s child has been weaned to avoid undue stress. The connection made between young children, even separated by age is seen in the thirteenth-century poem, *Leacht carad*. This was composed in the aftermath of the battle of Dún in 1260, commemorating the deaths of the Uí Cathain. The poem has been erroneously ascribed to Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, a false ascription pointed out by Ó Macháin.³⁸⁶ The age of the poet at the beginning of fosterage is given as five and in reminiscing about his dead foster-brothers the poet remembers the games they played, games that imply an age gap: ‘I used to follow Eachmharcach, beseeching him with tears till he would take me on his back; I was always the rider, he was my horse’.³⁸⁷ These games represent how close emotional bonds are forged between foster-siblings. As Larrington has suggested, the connections between fictive kin are often closer than those between natal kin as high death rates could lead to a greater age gap within the natal family. Although rarely the same age, foster-siblings would be closer, as they were chosen to be roughly coeval.³⁸⁸

Cú Chulainn’s coevals are most often found, in the *Táin*, fighting him. Every day a hero is chosen from the men of Ireland to face the boy from Ulster. In many cases the hero is one of Cú Chulainn’s foster-brothers. These were not raised at the same breast as Cú Chulainn but, rather, their connection is formed during their training under the tutelage of Scáthach in Alba. The first foster-brother that he encounters is Fer Báeth. This episode has its fullest expression in recension I of the *Táin*. It is here

³⁸⁵ CIH 1759.6-1770.14.

³⁸⁶ Padraig Ó Macháin, ‘Poems by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird’, *Celtica* 24 (2003), 252-63. Without the restriction to Fearghal’s lifetime it would seem more likely that the poem was composed closer to the date of the battle.

³⁸⁷ Lambert McKenna, ‘Some Irish Bardic Poems: LXXXII’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 36 (1947), 175-180: pp. 176, 179

³⁸⁸ Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, p. 23.

that the repeated emphasis is placed on their shared education. Fer Báeth is chosen to oppose Cú Chulainn ‘for they had both learnt the same art of war with Scáthach’ and when they meet Cú Chulainn criticises him for coming to fight his foster-brother, ‘friss a chomaltus 7 a mummi díb línaib Scáthaig’ ‘by his foster-brotherhood and by their common foster-mother Scáthach’.³⁸⁹ This is interesting when placed alongside the recension II version of events, in which Cú Chulainn similarly tries to turn Fer Báeth aside, but here the presence of Scáthach has fallen out. He is only mentions ‘in caratrad 7 in commund 7 in comaltus friss’ ‘their friendship and intimacy and brotherhood’.³⁹⁰ This could be because the tender language, associated with the shared foster-mother, is reserved for the more emotive encounter with Fer Diad in recension II. For the compiler of recension II it is the shared learning that links the two men rather than the foster-mother. Furthermore, the foster-brotherhood is placed alongside friendship (*caratrad*) and intimacy (*commund*). This highlights the shared friendship and experience as the key to forging fosterage bonds, without an appeal to a foster-parent. This is something that we see more often in the *flannaigecht* where the fosterage language is looser.³⁹¹

The coeval aspect to fosterage is made even more pronounced when we consider how fosterage language is used in an educational context. Fer Báeth is Cú Chulainn’s coeval and the educational aspect of their bond is central to its presentation. This is distinct from Cú Chulainn’s connection to Conall, since the bond with Fer Báeth comes from the training that they seek out when they are older and, to some extent, more independent than the babes-in-arms.³⁹² The notion of shared training is brought out in the *Táin* through the framing device of Lugaid mac Nóis, the loyal foster-brother. He is pointed out as the one foster-brother among the seven in the opposing

³⁸⁹ TBC 1, pp. 54, 174.

³⁹⁰ TBC LL, pp. 51, 191.

³⁹¹ What is more, the twelfth century date of recension II and the Fenian literature was a time in which the literary aesthetic is for long runs of alliterative words. This could account for the accretion of *caratrad* and *commund* to *comaltas*.

³⁹² I say to some extent, since Cú Chulainn’s youth is repeatedly emphasised in the tale of his education, told in *Oileamhain Con Cualainn*. Ó hUiginn, ‘Oileamhain Con Cualainn’, pp. 43-52.

army who is still loyal to Cú Chulainn, and it is he who tells Cú Chulainn's charioteer who will face him in battle on the next day.³⁹³ It is interesting to note that when describing Lugaid's loyalty Cú Chulainn calls Lugaid his *derbchomalta* 'true foster-brother', which seems to play on the similarity to 'full brother', *derbratháir*, and 'full sister', *derbsiur*, which are often used to differentiate brothers and sisters by blood from the wider use of these words.³⁹⁴ There is no blood connection between Lugaid and Cú Chulainn but Lugaid's steadfastness is referred to in terms which gradate sibling bonds. Furthermore, Cú Chulainn says that Lugaid, 'he is the only man who keeps faith and friendship (*commund 7 caratrad*) with me'.³⁹⁵ Once again in recension II, the foster-sibling bond is characterised by the ideas of *commund* and *caratrad*. As Edel has pointed out in this episode 'the focus is on loyalty *versus* betrayal'.³⁹⁶ In recension II a list is given of all the 'friends, foster-brothers and coevals' who are in the opposing army.³⁹⁷ While Lugaid mac Nóis acts honourably and keeps his faith and friendship, Fer Báeth renounces his. Indeed, it is his drunk insistence on renouncing his friendship with Cú Chulainn that very night which leads to Fer Báeth's downfall. It is worth noting, that when the break comes, it is the *caratraid*, the friendship, that is broken. This is the same ideal upheld by Conall in *Brislech Mór*. After the formal education is over, it is the friendship that was created that forms the basis of the ongoing foster-brother relationship.

The close foster-brother relationship is only ever referred to as a lost idyll in the *Táin*. However, it is difficult to find textual descriptions of that idyll. The group of foster-brother are referred to in *Tochmarc Emire*, but in such a way as may call into question this version of the foster-brother narrative. As noted before, this tale tells of Cú Chulainn's journey to Alba to receive training from Scáthach. When he arrives at

³⁹³ Although seven foster brothers are mentioned, Cú Chulainn only fights three of them. The rest do not receive any further characterisation.

³⁹⁴ eDIL s.v. *derbráthair*.

³⁹⁵ TBC LL, p. 50.

³⁹⁶ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 72.

³⁹⁷ TBC LL, p. 190.

her castle there is a ‘camp of Scáthach’s fosterlings (*daltai Scáthaige*)’.³⁹⁸ The list is similar to the one given in recension II of the *Táin* and it has a counterpart later in the tale, when the youths are journeying back to Ireland.³⁹⁹ These lists shed light on how foster-siblinghood is constructed, since both lists, in the *Táin* and in *Tochmarc Emire*, do very little to present a picture of foster-brotherhood. Foster-brotherhood is not described, but rather it is assumed based on the authority of another text. The list of foster-brothers in the *Táin* and in *Tochmarc Emire* gains authority from referring to the list in the other text. This becomes foreshadowing in *Tochmarc Emire*, and nostalgia for ‘the Edenic space of heroic innocence’ in Dooley’s words, in the *Táin*.⁴⁰⁰ Yet in *Tochmarc Emire* the foster-brothers do not play an active role. The additional note is just that: an additional note. Once the names of the boys are listed the authorial voice interjects ‘but it is not told in this version that they were there at that time’.⁴⁰¹ Although the bond is stated to have been formed as part of their joint training, this is not actively described, rather it is assumed.

Finally, there is another foster-sibling who appears in *Tochmarc Emire* and who again highlights the shared educational aspect of the bond. As Cú Chulainn is travelling on from Domnall’s house to Scáthach he comes across a mysterious unnamed woman in a glen who offers him hospitality. She knows Cú Chulainn because ‘they both had been dear foster-children (*comdaltai cartanachai*) with Ulbeccán Saxae “when I was there with you learning sweet speech from him” [she said]’.⁴⁰² After staying with his foster-sister Cú Chulainn proceeds on his way. The appearance of the unnamed woman is a rare example of a foster-sibling bond between the sexes. We have seen how Cú Chulainn interacts with his male foster-brothers; in *Tochmarc Emire*, the object of Cú Chulainn’s affections Emer is always accompanied by a crowd of her foster-sisters.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁸ CCC, pp. 49-50.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 60. This later list is slightly altered, but it still includes Fer Báeth and Fer Diad, as well as some other warriors Cú Chulainn faces on the *Táin* who are not said to be his foster brothers there.

⁴⁰⁰ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 168.

⁴⁰¹ CCC, p. 50.

⁴⁰² Ibid, pp. 249, 298.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, p. 71.

This single sex model is one we see most often, but it is evidently not universal. Once again the intimate (*cartanachai*) is linked to the educative. They were learning fine speech, one of the traits that can be enjoyed by both sexes. This can be contrasted with the martial feats learned by Cú Chulainn and the needlework demonstrated by Emer to her foster-sisters. Since the bond is created through education, a foster relationship between the sexes must be founded on a gender-neutral skill.

In this section I have described two ways the foster-sibling relationship was created, using Cú Chulainn as the central example. The first is at the breast of the foster-mother. We see this image of foster-siblinghood in those narratives that include the early life of the characters. While this bond is predicated on a close bodily connection, and so can appear more intimate, it is forged through the vertical connection to the foster-parents. Conall Cernach is joined to Cú Chulainn in the same breath as Amorgen and Finnchóem. The second way the foster-sibling bond is created appears to come later in childhood, through a mutual education. The educational bond is the one most often called upon during Cú Chulainn's fight with his foster-brothers in the *Táin*. The participants appear to be older and more numerous, as seen in the list of foster-brothers that appears in *Tochmarc Emire*. When this is coupled with the example of foster-sibling conflict to be found in the *Táin*, one could get the impression that this type of foster-sibling bond is more easily cast aside. However, we have seen how the female teacher, Scáthach, is an important unifying figure. While she does not create the nurturing bond that would come from looking after babes-in-arms, the emotionally charged figure of the foster-mother remains central to the foster-siblings' conception of their bond.⁴⁰⁴ The next section will address the figure of Fer Diad. He is Cú Chulainn's foster-brother who most dramatically demonstrates how the emotional bond created through education can be the most important.

⁴⁰⁴ We have seen how important the foster mother is in the preceding chapters.

3.3. Fer Diad: The Ideal Foster-brother?

This section will be a detailed analysis of the foster-brother relationship as it appears in *Comrac Fir Diad*. This episode, in which Cú Chulainn fights and kills his foster-brother Fer Diad, forms the emotional heart of the *Táin*. Although the action continues, the fight represents the end of the single combats and the narrative accelerates significantly afterwards. The episode most likely began as a separate tale that was added into the narrative of the *Táin*.⁴⁰⁵ It also survives as an independent episode in some fifteenth- and sixteenth- century manuscripts.⁴⁰⁶ However, the tale does appear in our earliest recension of the *Táin* and as such, is worth considering alongside the other examples of foster-siblinghood there. I will address two features of the presentation of the foster-brother bond, specifically as they appear in *Comrac Fir Diad*, but that also apply more broadly. Firstly, the intensity of emotion that lies behind the foster-sibling bond has led to an over-reading of the homoerotic elements of the tale – a common difficulty in interpreting homosocial relationships. In arguing against the homoerotic reading, I will demonstrate that a strongly emotional foster-brother bond is the basis for such deep feeling. However, when such intense emotions are displayed there is a tendency to ignore any negative aspects of the relationship. For that reason, I will also comment on the retrospective view of fosterage, as existing in an idealised past. Is the nature of the bond, created in youth and recalled, but not necessarily experienced in later life, one that particularly lends itself to romanticisation?

The shared learning – and more importantly, the learning that was not shared – comes to the fore in *Comrac Fir Diad*. In this episode Cú Chulainn faces and kills his

⁴⁰⁵ *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, ed. by Rudolf Thurneysen (Halle, 1921), pp. 219-35.

⁴⁰⁶ Stuart Rutten, 'Displacement and Replacement: *Comrac Fir Diad* Within and Without *Táin Bó Cúailnge*' in *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Maynooth 24-27 June 2005*, ed. by Brian Ó Catháin and Ruairi Ó hUiginn (Maynooth, 2009), pp. 313-25.

dearest foster-brother, Fer Diad.⁴⁰⁷ Fer Diad, it must be remembered, was one of those named as training in Alba with Cú Chulainn. Just as we have seen with Fer Báeth, the equality of their learning is the trait that unites the two men: ‘he was a match for Cú Chulainn for they both learnt the same art of war with Scáthach’.⁴⁰⁸ Tragically for Fer Diad, Cú Chulainn is taught a special technique, reserved for him alone by Scáthach, the *gae bulga*. It is a special spear case, invariably deadly, sometimes described as filling all the nerves of the victim’s body with spikes. It is said: ‘With the same foster-mothers, Scáthach and Úathach and Aífe, had they learnt the arts of valour and arms and neither of them had any advantage over the other save that Cú Chulainn possessed the feat of the *gae bulga*’.⁴⁰⁹ What is taught, and by whom, is central to how their foster-brotherhood was formed. The *gae bulga* was used in the death of Fer Diad and that of Cú Chulainn’s son, killed by his father in the tale *Aided Aínfer Aífe*.⁴¹⁰ The similarity between the death of Fer Diad and Connla has been noted before.⁴¹¹ The use of the *gae bulga* establishes an intimate connection between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad, just as it is used to prove the blood link between Cú Chulainn and his son, who arrives in Ulster as the mysterious child. The resort to the *gae bulga*, the weapon to be used in extremis, implicitly raises the stakes in these fights. That Cú Chulainn’s own son can best him is to be expected, it is part of his lineage. It is only after Cú Chulainn has been forced to use the *gae bolga* that he admits that Connla is his son. It is only when he takes the dead body out of the water that he says ‘Behold, my son, Ulster’.⁴¹² Up to this point he

⁴⁰⁷ For more on the position of *Comrac Fir Diad* in the *Táin* see TBC LL xxiv-xxix; Gearóid Mac Eoin, ‘The Dating of Middle Irish Texts’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982), 109-37; Ruairi Ó hUiginn, ‘The Background and Development of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*’ in *Aspects of the Táin*, ed. by James P Mallory (Belfast, 1992), pp. 29-68.

⁴⁰⁸ TBC 1, p. 174.

⁴⁰⁹ TBC LL, p. 211.

⁴¹⁰ CCC, pp. 9-15.

⁴¹¹ Janke de Vries, ‘Le conte irlandais *Aided Oenfir Aífe* et le thème dramatique du combat du père et du fils dans quelques traditions indo-européennes’, *Ogam* 9 (1957), 122-38; Anna M. Ranero, “‘That is what Scáthach did not teach me’: *Aided Óenir Aífe* and an Episode from the *Mahábhārata*”, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16/17 (1996/1997), 244-55.

⁴¹² CCC, p. 15.

has professed an ignorance of the boy's identity, even though this much is clear to Emer.⁴¹³

Though Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad do not share all their skills they do share foster-mothers. It had been noted before that the Otherworldly training ground of Alba is particularly feminine.⁴¹⁴ This is unusual in that these women are all warriors and leaders of their people. Bitel has this to say about the repeated appearance of warrior-women in medieval Irish texts: 'The early Irish were obsessed with arms-bearing woman warriors in contest with men, otherworldly *dominatrices* demanding sex from handsome heroes, insolent queens ordering soldiers around, or – best of all – any of these ill-humoured females being beaten in combat or sexually subdued by other warriors'.⁴¹⁵ On one level they function as these strange objects of desire and the demands of genre are that the Otherworld be filled with women. But more than this, they are foster-mothers and educators. Appropriating the educative, male, role goes hand in hand with their appropriation of the male, warrior role. When this is placed alongside their inescapable female physiology it allows the author to present two complementary ideas of fosterage. Scáthach teaches the boys, like a foster-father, but she also can nurture like a foster-mother. The appeal to their shared *muime* is more affecting than an appeal to an *oide*, something we do not see in the literature.⁴¹⁶ Scáthach can play both fosterer roles, depending on the needs of the narrative.

The language used of Scáthach underscores this. In both recensions of the *Táin* 'when we were with Scáthach' is used to recreate their shared past. Cú Chulainn's final lament in recension II uses Scáthach as a way to unite their dual natures. The fact that they shared a foster-mother explains why they are so similar. The poem which highlights their similarities begins with an image of the same foster-mother: 'inund

⁴¹³ Findon, *A Woman's Words*, pp. 102-04.

⁴¹⁴ Proinsias Mac Cana, 'The Sinless Otherworld of *Immram Brain*', *Ériu* 27 (1976), 95-115; Karin E. Olsen, 'Female Voices from the Otherworld: The Role of Women in Early Irish *Echtraí*', in *Airy Nothings: Imagining the Otherworld of Faerie from the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason*, ed. by Karin E. Olsen and Jan R. Veenstra, (Leiden, 2014), pp. 57-74.

⁴¹⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 204.

⁴¹⁶ Although none of the women actually breast feed the boys, the symbolism of their female physiology is such that it invokes the role of the breasts in creating foster-sibling bonds.

mummi máeth/ras slainni sech cách ... inund aisit arúath dúinn' 'The same tender foster-mother we had whose name is beyond all others ... the same nature we had, the same fearsomeness'.⁴¹⁷ The image of a tender mother, handing out gifts, fits the image of tender foster-mothers seen in chapter two. But what she teaches the boys is of central importance. This too, unites them. Indeed, in recension II their education is used to frame their encounters. When they fight on the first day Cú Chulainn asks Fer Diad how they should fight and he replies: 'Do you remember at all ... the choice feats of arms which we practised with Scáthach and Úathach and Aífe? ... If you do, let us have recourse to them'.⁴¹⁸ These feats form the basis of their combat until the final day, when both heroes demonstrate feats that they have not seen before: 'That day Fer Diad exhibited many and wonderful and brilliant feats of arms which he had not learned from anyone before that, neither from foster-mother nor foster-father (*ac mumme ná ac aite*), not from Scáthach nor Úathach nor Aífe, but he invented them himself on that day to oppose Cú Chulainn'.⁴¹⁹ This marks the final break in their equality, when they finally turn from a fight in which they were still joyful men, showing respect to one another, to a fight in which one foster-brother will be killed. The equality of foster-brotherhood is turned to a destructive individualism. This is the only time that a foster-father is mentioned and he seems out of place. Their shared past is recalled again and again, one in which the maternal figure of Scáthach unites them in what she has taught.

Not only do they both refer to their foster-mother but they recall in a tender way, what their shared life was like before they had been made to fight. Sheehan draws attention to the way homoerotic desire is expressed in the manner of Fer Diad's death and the lament that Cú Chulainn raises for him.⁴²⁰ This is a similar view to that expressed by Dooley, who sees the lament as appropriating a woman's voice to recast

⁴¹⁷ TBC LL, pp. 99, 234.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 85, 222.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 90, 226.

⁴²⁰ Sarah Sheehan, 'Fer Diad De-flowered: Homoerotics and Masculinity in Comrac Fir Diad' in *Ulidia* 2, ed. by Ó Catháin and Ó hUiginn, pp. 54-65.

the relationship on a basis of single-sex homoeroticism.⁴²¹ These readings have been used by Larrington for her analysis of the episode: ‘the erotic dimension to sworn-brotherhood is foregrounded in this episode’.⁴²² However, while their bond is certainly very emotionally resonant, I would argue that a lack of appreciation of the depth of feeling created by the foster-sibling bond, has led to an overly sexual reading of this episode. This is one of the benefits of an extended study of the emotional community of fosterage: it prevents false assumptions being made on isolated episodes. I will begin by briefly outlining some of the arguments used for the sexual reading of this passage.

The nature of Fer Diad’s death is often used as the starting point for a sexual reading of the episode. The *gae bolga* is thrown down the stream they are fighting in and finds the only hole in Fer Diad’s unpierceable horn-skin, his anus. Sheehan sees this as a sexual metaphor and draws the connection between this magic spear and the phallic embodiment of Cú Chulainn’s masculinity.⁴²³ Dooley has also noticed a homoerotic undercurrent in this piece through the juxtaposition of female and male relationships. She sees an increased misogyny throughout recension II, which is articulated in the death of Fer Diad. It is seen in the contrast between virtuous Cú Chulainn and the duplicity embodied by Finnbair and Medb. Fer Diad is made to betray his foster-brother through the promise of marriage of Finnbair, the arrangement brokered by her mother, Medb. The promised future life with the beautiful Finnbair is contrasted with the past life alongside Cú Chulainn. In this contrast, the heterosexual dream is an unworthy successor to their past homosocial existence. Women are demonised and then excluded from the discursive space of the lament, put into Cú Chulainn’s mouth. Dooley comments ‘in these laments for Fer Diad, not only is this ritual role of the mourning woman taken up by Cú Chulainn himself, but the space for a traditional feminine discursive role and loving gaze is also

⁴²¹ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, pp. 167-68.

⁴²² Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, p. 225.

⁴²³ Sheehan, ‘Fer Diad Deflowered’, p. 61. Berhardt-House has also read this act as particularly homoerotic (see *The Tain: A New Translation*, trans. by Ciaran Carson, (London, 2007), pp. 212-13).

explicitly denied'.⁴²⁴ In this line of argument the male and female spheres are conceptually separated into good and bad, the male bond is validated in all of its expression.

In the last quotation from Dooley, the male gaze is highlighted, brought out through the intensely specular nature of the lament. This approach to the emotional bond between foster-brothers is taken up by Sheehan. She comments of the lament that 'desire enters the picture when Cú Chulainn does not simply praise Fer Diad's perfection but voices an intense emotional attachment to his foster-brother, an attachment that extends to Fer Diad's body, face and behaviour'.⁴²⁵ It is supposedly note-worthy that Cú Chulainn appropriates some of the language used elsewhere by female mourners in his lament. The section beginning *Maith a Fir Diad, ba dursan dait* puts into Cú Chulainn's mouth the words that Emer uses to reproach the Ulster heroes for letting Cú Chulainn die in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthimne*.⁴²⁶ Yet I have demonstrated in the preceding chapter how fosterage opens the space of mourning to those outside the nuclear family. It is fitting that one foster-brother should mourn the death of another, as we saw for Tuirn and Níall. What is more, these laments, like most examples of this kind of poetry, are specular in their nature. They will praise the body, face and deeds of the deceased.

In the summary of previous work on Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn's relationship, some commentators have contrasted the ephemeral love for a woman with the love between foster-brothers. In the *Leacht carad* poem this contrast is made explicit: 'Not as the love a woman (*ní grádh mná*) has for a passing acquaintance was my love of Ó Catháin of Cluain; from my childhood I loved my good foster-brother and foster-father'.⁴²⁷ There is nothing to suggest that the love expressed in this poem – another lament it must be remembered – is anything other than that familial love for foster-

⁴²⁴ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 167.

⁴²⁵ Sheehan, 'Fer Diad Deflowered', pp. 63-4.

⁴²⁶ This is the repetition of the 'dursan nach' 'sad for you' formula, to be found in *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, p. 32 and TBC LL, pp. 94-5.

⁴²⁷ McKenna, 'Irish Bardic Poems LXXXII', pp. 176, 179.

family and patrons. The misogynistic binary of faithless women and faithful men is the background to the love expressed both here and in *Comrac Fir Diad*. Though misogynistic, it does not highlight homoerotic desire.

What is remarkable about Cú Chulainn's lament is not that he praises Fer Diad's beauty and valour in battle, but that those valorous deeds have been placed in an idealised past. It seems as if the ideal foster-brother bond can only exist in a tale, since it is only found in the memories of Cú Chulainn; their initial, emotional closeness is not described in the narratives of Scáthach's training. The memories are most clearly articulated in the poem *A Fir Diad, is truag in dál* found in recension II.⁴²⁸ Here Cú Chulainn recalls that he and Fer Diad fought side-by-side on an expedition referred to much more briefly in recension I. This poem, spoken after the *gae bulga* has been bloodily removed from Fer Diad, recounts their exploits in the battle against Germán Garbglas.⁴²⁹ Though the bloody corpse of Fer Diad is the beginning and end point of this poem, what is remembered is their work in concert. Not only is Fer Diad remembered but the other foster-brothers, Fer Báeth and Lugaid, as well. The poem contrasts the way the foster-sibling bond should ideally function with the bloody result of its deterioration.

This poem also recalls the bond of friendship placed on them both by Scáthach: 'Da naisc ár mummi go mblad/ar cró cotaig is óentad' 'Our foster-mother imposed on us a pact of friendship and agreement'.⁴³⁰ He has never had a friend like Fer Diad, but once again it is the foster-mother who presides over the creation of this bond. There are hints of the foster-brother bond created horizontally by the foster-brothers themselves. When Cú Chulainn recalls their companionship, he paints a tender picture: 'We were loving friends,/we were companions in the wood./We were men

⁴²⁸ TBC LL, pp. 97-98.

⁴²⁹ As brief aside it is worth pointing out that this poem, and the image of the spear bloody spear lying beside Fer Diad, has been taken to represent the sexual violation inherent in the death by *gae bolga* (Sheehan, 'Fer Diad Deflowered', p. 60). In what follows I will demonstrate the more vital reading of the episode as based on the disjunction between Cú Chulainn's heroic actions in the face of Fer Diad's treachery. This treachery can only be met with an ignoble end.

⁴³⁰ TBC LL, pp. 98, 233

who shared a bed./We would sleep a deep sleep/after our weary fights'.⁴³¹ The sharing of a bed recalls the shared crib in *Immram curaig Maíle Dúin* and the reproach that Fer Diad uses earlier in the episode, alluding to Cú Chulainn's junior role in their relationship. Fer Diad notes that Cú Chulainn used to be his serving man 'who used to prepare my spears and dress my bed'.⁴³² This jibe represents the age gap between the two men, a facet of the foster-sibling bond addressed above. Finally, their ideal life lived in the woods and wilderness recalls the close male bonds created within the *ffian*. Edel has pointed out how the laments in this episode capture the nostalgic feel of *Acallam na Senórach*.⁴³³ I will explore the *ffian* bonds and foster-sibling bonds in a later section of this chapter. Suffice it to say, that the air of nostalgia that permeates these recollections distances the foster-sibling bond from the narrative present.

The ideal foster-sibling bond, represented by the former life of Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad, is articulated throughout their encounter by poetry and appeals to the past. The foster-sibling bond itself is distanced from the narrative present through these statements, not only in time but in space, since the training takes place in Alba and the battle with Germán seems to have taken place in Greece.⁴³⁴ In this sense the heroic, stable foster-sibling bond only exists in the literary space. It does not appear in the *Táin*, nor does it appear in *Tochmarc Emire*. Is the recension II version of *Comrac Fir Diad* commenting on the way the ideal foster-sibling bond is an unattainable reality? Fer Diad is the ideal foster-brother for Cú Chulainn. Their shared education in Alba, with Scáthach functioning as a maternal overseer, is the basis for a strong, close bond. Yet, we are only introduced to this ideal foster relationship as it is collapsing in the bloodiest fashion. This could be a comment on the way fosterage is universally presented as a positive relationship in our literary sources, but that fiction cannot have been entirely accurately recreated in a social reality. The creator of the *Táin* is aware

⁴³¹ TBC LL, pp. 85, 221.

⁴³² Ibid, p. 219.

⁴³³ Edel, *Inside the Táin*, p. 114.

⁴³⁴ 'Had I seen you die among the warriors of great Greece (*mórGréc*), TBC LL, pp. 98, 233.

of its fictional nature and so contrasts for us the difficult “reality” of a foster-sibling bond with the fictionalised, distant ideal of perfect harmony.

3.4. When Is A Foster-brother Not A Foster-brother?

I have outlined how the foster-sibling bond can be created: either through shared rearing at the breast of a foster-mother, or through shared education. For the rest of this chapter, I shall address how the term foster-brother was applied. We have seen how the relationship can be fraught, but there are examples of this tension that do not end in multiple murders. When not expressed through violence, this tension is expressed in the shifting vocabulary of fosterage. In this section I will examine a number of texts that play with the notion of foster-siblinghood. When we turn to saints’ lives, we see elements of fictive brotherhood centred around education. However, in many cases the vocabulary of foster-brotherhood is eschewed. Rather, among peers we see images of foster-fathers and foster-sons, of teachers and pupils, used to underscore the superiority of the saint. Such power play is not restricted to religious texts and I will address shifts of terminology in heroic narrative. Examining negative emotions and bad feeling between foster-siblings reminds us that although fosterage is often described as a positive practice, its emotional community is complex.

I begin with Moling and the description of his education in the school of Collanach.⁴³⁵ Religious education forms an interesting parallel to the martial education, as it is, ostensibly, open to both sexes. We have seen something of this in Cú Chulainn and his foster-sister’s shared learning of ‘fair speech’ with Ulbeccán. Such a cerebral, communicative education features more women than the martial examples, where women are never the pupils. But a monastic education is a homosocial one, mirroring again, how the bonds were formed in the warrior camp. The well-known ecclesiastical wariness of women also colours the foster-sibling relationships, since they are often

⁴³⁵ *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, pp. 12-23.

also full, blood siblings. The discussion then passes to how these two identities, foster- and natal siblings, work together or conflict with one another. Once I have addressed these relationships within religious writing, I will turn to their appearance in other narratives.

Moling is said to be taken into a monastery at a very young age, as his mother tried to kill him at birth, in order to assuage her guilt over his incestuous conception. The child is rescued and reared by Collanach ‘until his time of study’.⁴³⁶ At that stage he begins his education under Collanach, alongside other pupils. In this regard Collanach appears in the role of *magister*, charged with caring for the children in the monastery.⁴³⁷ The relationship of Moling with his fellow pupils is not the same as Cú Chulainn’s, although the educational setting is similar. Moling is bonded to them through the learning provided by Collanach, but while this mirrors the fosterage bond, it is not as close. The sense of distance is exacerbated by Moling both serving and teaching his fellow pupils. The serving element can be seen in secular fosterage in the *mug*, slave, names given to a child in fosterage.⁴³⁸ However, this role is subverted when he takes on the role of teacher. This is a common trope in many saints’ lives, but here it moves Moling out of a peer relationship with the other pupils. However, given the ways the saints’ lives were used to uphold the political ambitions of their founder’s monasteries, fosterage relationships can be seen as implying a relationship between monasteries. As Charles-Edwards notes: ‘Such alliances could be perceived in different ways: for example, the relationship of pupil to teacher, assimilated to that between foster-parent and foster-child, suggested a superiority without implying subjection; the same was true of the relationship of “soul-friend” to the person whose spiritual direction was undertaken’.⁴³⁹ Foster-relationships are created within the foster-family but have much wider implications.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, pp. 12-13.

⁴³⁷ Mayke de Jong, ‘Growing Up in a Carolingian Monastery: Magister Hildemar and His Oblates’, *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983), 99-128: p. 106; *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996) p. 72. See also Johnston, *Literacy and Identity*, p. 108 ff.

⁴³⁸ *Cath Maighe Léna*, ed. Jackson, p. 2. I have examined this trend earlier in this thesis.

⁴³⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 123.

It is primarily education that frames Moling's relationship with the other pupils. As it is explained 'All the sons of wise men and nobles that were brought to Brénainn to study, Brénainn assigned to Collanach. So there were thirty sons of kings and lords with Collanach and none of them was better than Tairchell [Moling] in figure and shape and appearance'.⁴⁴⁰ This picture of the hero, among the band of fellow fosterlings but excelling them in every way is a common feature of the heroic biography. In another saintly example from Máedóc's life, Máedóc takes Fergus son of Oilill as a fosterling (*dalta*). Yet Fergus is also referred to as an 'equal-aged (*comháoisí*) companion' to Máedóc.⁴⁴¹ Although one would expect parity between these equal aged companions, as we saw for Cú Chulainn and his foster-brothers, the saint's superiority is demonstrated through his role as foster-father, instead. Returning to Moling, the appropriation of the foster-father role is, paradoxically, seen when he begs to serve the pupils. He makes a special request from his fosterer to serve them by journeying to ask for alms. He is granted the request and 'thus he continued until his sixteen years were complete, serving his fosterer (*a aiti*) and his foster-brothers (*a comaltad*)'.⁴⁴² When he begins this service Moling takes his fosterer's staff. The staff is a symbol of Moling adopting the role of fosterer, an image made more powerful as Moling is providing food, acting as a nurturer, for his foster-brothers. Both Moling and Cú Chulainn excel their peers, but Moling is only once referred to as a peer or foster-brother. His excellence is such that comparison is not even invited. Cú Chulainn is better than his foster-brothers, the foster language highlighting the comparison of their abilities.

Often, given the monastic nature of this education, the relationships were only between members of the same sex. However, there are a few examples of foster-brothers and -sisters interacting. Brendan is an interesting case, as he relates to a full sister: a *germanam virginem* in the Latin version of his life. Griffiths has shown the

⁴⁴⁰ *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁴¹ BNE II, p. 265. For information on the date and context of the life see Charles Doherty, 'The Transmission of the Cult of St Máedhóg' in *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmissions*, ed. by P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (Dublin, 2002), pp. 268-83.

⁴⁴² *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, p. 15.

ubiquity of the connection between a famous male saint with a female figure, most often a sister: ‘as a connection that had been privileged since late antiquity, and that had become almost a prerequisite for male sanctity by the sixth century, the sibling bond was central to the pious medieval imagination’.⁴⁴³ She has demonstrated that this is the case with Benedict of Nursia and Bernard of Clairvaux, where sisters’ roles are fabricated or much enhanced from their role in the *vita*. Brendan’s sister, Brig appears in the section of Brendan’s life when he has been sent to Bishop Erc, at age fifteen, to learn letters – having learned how to behave from Íte. Given the unusual nature of this passage, I will quote it in full:

Habebat quoque germanam virginem, nomine Brigam, quam intime diligebat; quia, etsi natura sanguinis reddebat eam caram, gratie tum illustracio faciebat cariorem. Hac enim gratia interiores pueri oculos illuminante, faciem sororis aliquando videbat similem aspectu lune splendentis, et faciem magistri sui, sancti silicet Erci episcopi, quasi globum solis aspiciebat.⁴⁴⁴

He also had a full sister, called Brig, whom he loved greatly. Since, though he cared for her because of the nature of her blood, the light of grace made her dearer to him. For, with this grace illuminating the boy’s inner eyes, sometimes he saw the face of his sister appear like the shining moon and so too the face of his teacher, the holy bishop Erc, looked like the ball of the Sun.

This passage downplays their blood tie, in favour of one based on their shared faith. Since Brig is introduced when Brendan has gone to study with Erc, she is connected to this later, educative portion of his life, rather than the earlier discussion of his blood family. In the Irish version of his life, the passage plays out in a similar fashion, although there is no reference to the competing bond of blood and foster love. He loves her because he can see angels in attendance around her.

In the example given above, the author of the saint’s life attempts to highlight the relationship, sanctified by God and prioritized over blood. But it introduces an interesting question about the overlapping sense of identity that comes when blood siblings are also foster-siblings. Charles-Edwards has noted, using the example of

⁴⁴³ Fiona J. Griffiths, ‘Siblings and the Sexes Within the Medieval Religious Life’, *Church History* 77 (2008) 26-53: p. 52.

⁴⁴⁴ VSH, I, pp. 99-100.

Baíthéne and Columba, that artificial and natural kinship can overlap without much concern.⁴⁴⁵ However, these connections are intergenerational; we have seen, in chapter one, how maternal uncles are often fosterers. The question here is whether you can be blood and foster-siblings at one and the same time. In other saints' lives blood siblings are included among the fellow pupils without much comment. For example, in the Life of Gerald of Mayo, he goes with his brothers to be taught by Colmán. The affection that is mentioned here is of the brothers for their teacher. The first reason given for their going with Gerald to Ireland is: 'for love (*amorem*) of their teacher'.⁴⁴⁶ We will see how another Colmán Ela fosters twin brothers by miraculously producing milk and honey from his breast. The brothers themselves, however, are not shown to interact. They have complementary special powers relating to learning and as such their lives are bound by the expectations and conventions of the classroom. Beyond that we are not given a sense of their lives together. The complementarity of natal brotherhood, foster-brotherhood, and monastic brotherhood can be illustrated with reference to the "three companions" of the *immram* texts – tales of fantastic voyages in the western ocean. Without delving too deeply into the vexed nature of the relationship between the religious and secular versions of this tale, Máel Dúin and Bran are accompanied by their foster-brothers,⁴⁴⁷ Brendan is accompanied on his voyage by three brother monks who seek him out,⁴⁴⁸ and finally the voyage of the Uí Chorra focuses on three brothers.⁴⁴⁹ In this way, we can see foster-brothers, monks, and brothers performing the same narrative function.

The ties of blood and of fosterage are not limited to the close foster-family. Examining how the more distant connections are called upon demonstrates the strong emotive force of fosterage. In the Life of Rúadán, Senach, a bishop, comes to the saint

⁴⁴⁵ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 80.

⁴⁴⁶ VSH, II, p. 108.

⁴⁴⁷ *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, ed. Oskamp, pp. 52, 102-03.

⁴⁴⁸ BNE, I, p. 52. For comments on how the tales of Brendan and Máel Dúin are related see James Carney, 'Review: Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis (Publications in Medieval Studies, The University of Notre Dame, XVI) by Carl Selmer', *Medium Aevum* 32 (1963), pp. 37-44.

⁴⁴⁹ Stokes, W., 'The Voyage of the Húi Corra', *RC* 14 (1893), 22-69: p. 29.

seeking aid for a nobleman: ‘Then bishop Senach took Aed Guaire with him to Rúadán for fear of the king. For the two sisters of Rúadán, Cáel and Rúanat, had fostered (*ro oilestar*) the noble bishop Senach’.⁴⁵⁰ Senach uses the kinship he has with Rúadán through the fosterage system to aid him in this difficult time. The fact that Rúadán’s sisters raised him connects the two holy men, although no connection is explicitly mentioned.

A similar expanding of foster relationship can be seen in non-hagiographical texts. It has been remarked that the other sons of Dond Désa, beyond the three who were fostered with Conaire, count themselves as his foster-brothers, even though they were not raised alongside him.⁴⁵¹ Such use of fosterage language without an accompanying reason for emotional connection is rare. It highlights the betrayal perpetrated by all the sons of Dond Désa and could be an anomaly of the text. As O’Connor says ‘Conaire’s divine ancestry and royal calling is offset, and indeed tripped up by, his obligations to an unusually large number of foster-brothers and foster-parents’.⁴⁵² If the power of fosterage is such, to draw less directly connected members of the family together, foster-cousins if you will, such a situation rapidly becomes unwieldy. We saw in the law texts that foster-brothers were only considered close if they had been reared at the same blanket, cup, and bed. Conaire ignores this distinction with disastrous consequences. I will return to the three sons of Dond Désa later, those to whom Conaire was closest, who did share an upbringing with him.

In O’Connor’s argument, Conaire is put in a difficult position because of the competing obligations he has to his natal and fosterkin. The emotional draw of both of these ties of brotherhood is evoked in *Leacht carad*. The poet addresses their loss equally: ‘That my brother and Ó Catháin, my foster-brother, have been left on the battle-field means that we are not safe at our home owing to that slaughter among the men of Ulaidh’.⁴⁵³ This wider network, that extends beyond the intimate foster-

⁴⁵⁰ BNE, I, p. 322; II, p. 313.

⁴⁵¹ TBDD, pp. 35-6.

⁴⁵² O’Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*, p. 95.

⁴⁵³ McKenna, ‘Irish Bardic Poems: LXXXII’, pp. 176, 179.

brothers, to more distant family members, can also be seen in the annals. To give one example, in the Annals of Ulster, under the year 1170, it is said that Mac Murcharda's hostages were killed. His hostages were his own son and grandson, as well as the son of his foster-brother.⁴⁵⁴ The son of his foster-brother seems to hold the same emotional weight as his own offspring when deciding who would be a hostage. The interaction of blood and fosterkin is seen in Conall Cernach's relationship with Cú Chulainn, in *Aided Guill ocus Garb*. When Cú Chulainn threatens to rain destruction on the nobles of Ulster, Conall Cernach rises up to support him: "Well", says Conall "where are my brothers? Arise and help Cú Chulainn!".⁴⁵⁵ Conall is calling on his extended blood family in order to protect the interests of his foster-brother Cú Chulainn.

The lives of Cíarán of Saighir demonstrate the deep love that can exist between foster-siblings of different sexes. The episode in which he interacts with his foster-sister is one of the examples of miraculous abortion to be found in medieval Irish saints' lives.⁴⁵⁶ While the miraculous service that he performs for his foster-sister is an important display of his love and care for her well-being, it will not be the main focus of my discussion. There are two Irish versions of the Life of Cíarán of Saighir. In Plummer's opinion the life known as version I, is an abbreviation of the Latin life of the saint and version II is derived from another source.⁴⁵⁷ I point out the differences between the two lives as they describe his foster-sister differently. In version I she is introduced as the dear fosterling of Cíarán's mother: 'Now Liadain, the mother of Cíarán, had a favourite fosterling (*dalta dil*), named Bruinech, and there was not in the world a woman more beautiful or more virtuous'.⁴⁵⁸ Although Cíarán is nowhere directly named as the foster-brother of Bruinech, the fact that she is the fosterling of

⁴⁵⁴ AU, pp. 164-65.

⁴⁵⁵ Stokes, 'Deaths of Goll and Garb', pp. 426-27. When peace is returned to the group it said to be 'peaceful like the children of one father and one mother'.

⁴⁵⁶ Zubin Mistry, 'The Sexual Shame of the Chaste: "Abortion Miracles" in Early Medieval Saints' Lives', *Gender & History* 25 (2013), 607-620; Maeve B. Callan, 'Of Vanishing Fetuses and Maidens Made-Again: Abortion, Restored Virginity, and Similar Scenarios in Medieval Irish Hagiography and Penitentials', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21 (2012), 282-296.

⁴⁵⁷ BNE I, pp. xxv-xxvi. For more on the manuscript history of the various versions see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, esp. pp. 294-5 and 391-2.

⁴⁵⁸ BNE I, p. 104; II, pp. 100-01.

his mother places him in that relationship. This is the construction of foster-siblinghood through the vertical fosterkin bonds that we saw at work for Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach. What is striking here is that Cíarán is not explicitly called her foster-brother and, as we shall see, he in fact takes on a different identity.

In version II the maiden is introduced into the story in much the same fashion: 'Now Liadain was Cíarán's mother and she and her virgins lived near him. And she had a comely fosterling (*dalta*) named Bruinech, a daughter of the king of Munster'.⁴⁵⁹ Again the focus of the passage is on Liadain. She is the nexus around whom the relationship between Bruinech and Cíarán is constructed, even though no explicit connection made between them. Version II also presents Liadain as the head of her own group of virgins in some way connected to Cíarán's foundation. This places the relationship between Liadain and Bruinech in a religious rather than familial setting although in version I, the two women are said to be in Cíarán's presence, presumably in a devotional context. As the episode goes on, how their relationship is framed changes. After Cíarán has demanded Bruinech's return after being abducted by king Daimene,⁴⁶⁰ she is referred to as Cíarán's fosterling: 'he prostrated himself before Cíarán and gave him his fosterling (*a dhalta*) back. And when Cíarán saw his fosterling (*a dalta*) coming towards him ...'.⁴⁶¹ When the relationship between Cíarán and Bruinech is made explicit, it is presented as a vertical relationship of foster-father to foster-daughter. This could be because Cíarán is placed in a position of power over the girl, since he is responsible for both her spiritual and physical well-being, particularly now that he has saved her from the predations of a rapacious king. Although she is very dear to his mother, and Cíarán goes out of his way to call her back to the spiritual flock, she is not seen as his equal, even on a generational level. The saint stands alone.

⁴⁵⁹ BNE, I, p. 115; II, p. 111.

⁴⁶⁰ As an aside, the girl is rescued from the clutches of king Daimene when Cíarán miraculously causes the sound of a cuckoo to wake the king in the middle of winter. As has been noted elsewhere the medieval Irish were aware of the cuckoo's reputation for stealing the nourishment of another. It may be important that this particular spring bird is invoked before the discussion of fosterlings.

⁴⁶¹ BNE, I, pp. 116; II, p. 112. I have slightly adapted the translation.

Turning to the female foster bond that exists between Liadain and her virgins, we often see foster-sisters grouped together in the same way as the homosocial foster-brotherhoods. For example, when Aífe runs from Scotland to Ireland in *Acallam na Senórach* she takes her nine foster-sisters with her: ‘her nine foster-sisters (*naenmur comalta*) who were about her she brought with her’.⁴⁶² These other women act as a fitting escort for Aífe, as she leaves the Scottish court for Ireland. The female foster group is matched in Ireland, when they meet Finn resting from hunting attended by his ‘beautiful, beloved foster-son’.⁴⁶³ The notion that foster-sisters are more suited to roles of attendants, rather than full partners in an enterprise has been noted by Ní Dhonnchadha in her discussion of the word *inailt*.⁴⁶⁴ It also features in Boll’s analysis of *Fingal Rónáin*.⁴⁶⁵ In these discussions, the role of the foster-sister is closely associated with subservience, supposedly different from the mutual support shown between foster-brothers. Yet, this is not always the case and it is worth considering that all foster-sibling relationships contain some level of subservience, as demonstrated later in this section.

When Cú Chulainn is wooing Emer, he finds her on the playing field ‘with her foster-sisters (*comaltaib*) around her’.⁴⁶⁶ These are said to be the daughters of the local nobility who were sent to the court of Forgall, Emer’s father. This practice could demonstrate how fosterage was supposed to cement ties between the noble families, even if this looks a lot more like the type of patronal fostering we see on the Continent, than the “fostering down” model suggested for Ireland. Fostering down the social scale has been tentatively suggested by Kelly and rather more enthusiastically adopted by Parkes in his theory of patrimonial consolidation from cliental to patronal ‘pro-parenthood’.⁴⁶⁷ In this sense the group of foster-sisters mirrors the boy-troop of Emain that Cú Chulainn first encounters in ‘The Boyhood Deeds’. Yet what unites these

⁴⁶² AnS, p. 127.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘*Inailt*’, pp. 185-191.

⁴⁶⁵ Boll, ‘Seduction, Vengeance and Frustration’, pp. 17-40.

⁴⁶⁶ CCC, p. 23.

⁴⁶⁷ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 90; Parkes, ‘Adoptive Kinship and Clientage in Northwest Europe’, p. 361.

women is their education. An education that they are receiving from Emer, their foster-sister: ‘They were learning (*foclaind*) needle-work and fine handiwork from Emer’.⁴⁶⁸ As noted in the Introduction, this is one of the skills the daughter of a king or noble must be taught during their period of fosterage. Yet it is surprising that they should be learning from their foster-sister. This image takes us back to the hierarchical use of teaching seen in the saints’ lives: by teaching her foster-sisters Emer demonstrates her superiority over them.

It may be that these sources use horizontal education as a way to highlight the hierarchical differences between foster-siblings, differences in class we would expect in as stratified a society as medieval Ireland. When the son of a higher ranked noble is sent to be raised among his social inferiors, it may have caused tension. Such a situation can be seen in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. The mother of Conaire, the character who will become king of Ireland, calls for three sets of foster-parents for her son. We have seen this multiple foster-fatherhood in chapter one. Here I wish to examine how Conaire’s relationship is formed with the three sons of Dond Désa. Their rearing is described:

Ro bátar didiu teora búada for Conaire .i. búaid clúaisi 7 búaid radairc 7 búaid n-airdmesa, 7 ro múin búaid cach comalta dia trí comaltaib díbsin 7 nach sére do-gníthea dosom do-téigtis dí a cethror. Citis teora séire do-gníthi dosom no téigead cach fear díb dia sére. Inand éitiud 7 gaiscead 7 dath each doib a ceathrur.⁴⁶⁹

Conaire had three special skills, the skill of hearing, the skill of seeing and the skill of judging and he taught a skill to each of his three foster-brothers. If a meal were prepared for him they would go to it, all four together. Even if three meals were made for him each of them would go to his meal. Those four had the same clothing and weapons and the same coloured horses.

These four are presented as a tight-knit group, kitted out the same and going everywhere together. As O’Connor has pointed out, it is only when they separate that disaster begins to over-take them.⁴⁷⁰ Their unity is described in fosterage terms since

⁴⁶⁸ CCC, p. 23.

⁴⁶⁹ TBDD, p. 4

⁴⁷⁰ O’Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*, p. 95.

meals and clothes are used to differentiate the social standing among foster-siblings.⁴⁷¹ We have seen in the Introduction that only the most noble can wear purple and blue, and eat porridge with extra wheat made with new milk. Despite the differences in their social background, Conaire and the three sons of Dond Désa perform an outward equality. They have the same clothes and the same food. Yet, blood will out and this performative equality is prefaced by a description of Conaire's superiority, teaching them his skills. This creates a tension in their relationship that is resolved with death and destruction.

Using the role of teaching to give a degree of differentiation and hierarchy to ostensibly equal foster-siblings is something seen in the saints' lives. To return to the Life of Moling, after he begins to study with Collanach he soon surpasses all his foster-brothers in learning: 'and he used to instruct (*forcetal*) the other boys, so that they were all honouring him'.⁴⁷² Moling's ability to teach his fellow foster-siblings comes from his increased piety. Moling himself is taught by an angel. The angel is almost the highest authority, allowing the saint to learn without losing face to a mortal. This can be seen later in Moling's life when he is sent to Maedóc of Ferns 'to be his pupil (*daltusa*)'.⁴⁷³ However, when Moling arrives at Ferns, Maedóc rises before the newcomer, they make a pact of friendship, and Moling carries on his way. Despite coming to be a *dalta*, no teaching is given and the two saints part as equals. When they make union or friendship the term used is, *áentaídh*.⁴⁷⁴ This word is used of saints making covenants with each other but there are some further nuances to pull out.⁴⁷⁵ *Áentaídh*, is used when Cú Chulainn says Scáthach bound him and Fer Diad in friendship.⁴⁷⁶ Furthermore, this word occurs in one of the infamous examples of supposed blood-

⁴⁷¹ Food and clothes are used by Medb in *Bruiden Da Choca* to assert her foster-mother connection to Cormac (*Bruiden Da Choca*, ed. Toner, pp. 104-05.)

⁴⁷² *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁷³ *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 24.

⁴⁷⁵ eDIL, s.v. oentu.

⁴⁷⁶ TBC LL, p. 98.

brotherhood in the medieval Irish corpus.⁴⁷⁷ The intent of the author of Moling's life is to place Moling and Máedóc on an equal footing and to gloss over Moling's subordinate position as *dalta*. The subordination implied by the teacher-pupil relationship is subverted by the equality of their friendship, a friendship framed in the same language used of foster-brothers. The power relationships involved in foster-relationships have to be carefully negotiated. When we examine the language of fosterage and friendship used, we can see the emotional expectations of foster-siblinghood.

We have seen how the saints' lives play with the traditional structure of foster-families. The idea of the young pupil becoming the master is seen in a number of lives.⁴⁷⁸ What emerges from these episodes is how the medieval Irish depicted the disconnected saint who should be an exemplar to the monastic community, a community in which all are linked as brothers in Christ. The relationships that are most central are the vertical ones, of teacher and pupil. For example, in the Life of Berach, when he constructs a monastery, Fráech and Daigh mac Cairill come to consecrate it. Fraech, his mother's brother, baptised him and raised him 'until he was old enough to study' and at seven years old 'he was taken to Daigh mac Cairill to study'. Fraech ends up living on the eastern end of the meadow in which the church is built and 'whoever should persecute any one of them, all three of them [Berach, Freach, and Daigh] would be his enemies'.⁴⁷⁹ From this we see that vertical relationships are the ones that are treasured, although to glorify Berach these vertical relationships of education are made into horizontal relationships of friendship. Such a shift inverts the horizontal relationships between pupils that are made vertical by the saint taking on the role of teacher or *oide*.

⁴⁷⁷ John C. Hodges, 'The Blood Covenant Among the Celts', *RC* 44 (1927), 109-56. For a more nuanced consideration of these sources see Klaus Oschema, 'Blood-brothers: A Ritual of Friendship and the Construction of the Imagined Barbarian in the Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History* 32 (2006), 275-301.

⁴⁷⁸ VSH I, pp. 8, 49, 71-2, 88, 99, 174, 201, 259; Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, p. 27.

⁴⁷⁹ BNE, II, p. 32

The greater concern for the vertical relationships is seen in the way fellow pupils and foster-siblings are presented as undifferentiated masses. It is found in the Life of Moling and it is also to be found in the presentation of Íte's school in the Life of Brendan: 'hec enim virgo multos sanctorum Hibernie ab infantia nutrit', yet the fellow pupils of Brendan receive no more attention than this.⁴⁸⁰ Although Íte is described as the foster-mother of the saints of Ireland, she is rarely depicted rearing a crowd of them like this. In most cases, where a holy person fosters more than one saint, each relationship is treated individually, focussing on one teacher and one pupil. This approach avoids the assumption of foster-siblinghood and equality between characters who are marked out as unparalleled. Once again, the hagiographer avoids equality suggested by the foster-sibling bond.

Returning to Conaire, his superiority, demonstrated through his role as a teacher, is not divinely ordained. Rather he is the son of the Otherworld and will become the king, whereas the sons of Dond Désa are the sons of a warrior and raider.⁴⁸¹ This difference is made apparent when Conaire decides to spare his foster-brothers from their just punishment for raiding: 'Let each man slay his son but spare my fosterlings (*mo daltaiseo*)'.⁴⁸² The sons of Dond Désa have moved from foster-brothers to fosterlings. The appropriation of the foster-paternal role occurs again later in the tale, when the sons of Dond Désa are describing the inhabitants of the hostel. Fer Rogain says 'Our foster-father (*ar n-aitine*) is there, that is the high king of Ireland, Conaire mac Etirscél'.⁴⁸³

O'Connor sees this shift in terminology as a deliberate choice by the author/compiler, to introduce the 'medieval Irish equivalent of a Freudian slip', in which Conaire's desire to protect his foster-brothers is shown through his slip into

⁴⁸⁰ VSH, I, p. 99.

⁴⁸¹ He is referred to as a *féni*. Although, as we shall see, the corporate nature of the *fíán* would appear to lend itself to the construction of these close foster sibling bonds.

⁴⁸² TBDD, p. 7.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, p. 20.

paternal language; the slip is mirrored by Fer Rogain's own change of diction.⁴⁸⁴ I would like to suggest that this paternal care is an expression of the power relationship between Conaire and his foster-brothers. Shifts in power between foster-brothers can be expressed by such shifts in terminology. In Emer's lament at the end of 'The Death of Cú Chulainn' she says: 'It sent Conall ... so that he was zealously avenging his fosterling (*dalta*)'.⁴⁸⁵ The change in terminology could be motivated by the form of the poem, prizing alliteration, but it could also arise from Conall taking responsibility for his dead foster-brother.

For Conaire and his foster-brothers, the tension in the differences in power and status between them, is finally resolved in violence at the end of the tale. Although the foster-brothers are described as close and equal in all things, the fact that Conaire is their teacher places him above them. This superiority comes from their different parentage. The grandsons of Dond Désa are descended from a *féni*, which places the two lineages in conflict and highlights differences in social hierarchy. Their paternal, blood ties come to the fore when they begin their raiding: 'His foster-brothers grumbled at the taking from them of their father's and their grandfather's prerogatives (*dána a n-athar 7 a seanathar*), that is theft and robbery and the slaughter of men and raiding'.⁴⁸⁶ Conaire and his foster-brothers are doomed to fight before they were born, as their bloodlines are so inimical to one another. The real tragedy in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is that Conaire's affection for his foster-brothers prevents him from justly slaying them.⁴⁸⁷ The affectionate bonds of fosterage cause the ultimate breakdown of his polity.

⁴⁸⁴ O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, p. 100. West ('The Genesis of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: A Reappraisal of the "Two-Source" Theory' *Celtica* 23 (1999), 413-35) and Boll (Fosterkin in Conflict, pp. 44-45) see this as an example of textual contradiction, introduced by error rather than for a deliberate effect. While this is a plausible I think it best to attribute intention – to be explained – over error.

⁴⁸⁵ *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, pp. 33, 49.

⁴⁸⁶ TBDD, p. 7.

⁴⁸⁷ Similar themes of highlight disaster by having the conflict between foster-brothers has been posited to explain why Máel Dúin's foster-brothers accompany him on his journey (*The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, ed. Oskamp, p. 52).

Class awareness is a source of conflict between foster-siblings in many different tales. To give one example, *Tochmarc Étaíne* 'The Wooing of Étaín', begins with a tale of how the Dagda illicitly fathers Óengus 'In Mac Óg' with the wife of another. To hide the deed, Óengus is fostered at the house of Midir. One day while the youths of the nobles of Ireland are playing, Óengus gets into a fight with Triath, another of Midir's fosterlings. Óengus begins the quarrel: 'It irks me that the son of serf (*mac an mogad*) should hold speech with me'.⁴⁸⁸ Óengus is said to believe that he was Midir's son, as we have seen in the case of Máel Dúin. Triath sets him right by saying: 'I take it no less ill that a hireling (*in t-amus*) whose mother and father are unknown should hold speech with me'.⁴⁸⁹ This is interesting as there are two levels of social snobbery at work. In the first place Óengus assumes that he is Midir's son, something that would not be unreasonable given 'Midir's great love (*med a grada*) for him', and resents the approach of the other fosterling.⁴⁹⁰ However, Óengus is actually the unknown and so is undone by his foster-brother, who is interestingly Óengus's 'joint-chief' (*leaththuiseach*) in their game. The child of unknown parentage, set on a quest to discover his father after being mocked at play, is a common tale motif.⁴⁹¹ Chesnutt has looked at this motif across a number of different tales, but he misses the fact that, in the Irish texts, the context in which this mocking occurs is often a fosterage one.⁴⁹² It is worth noting that Triath is identified as the fosterling of Midir, rather than the foster-brother of Óengus. The primary relationship, throughout the rest of the tale is between Midir and his dearly beloved foster-son and the tale does not focus on the sibling bond. Triath is present during Óengus's time as a *maccaem* but their association goes no further.

In this section of the chapter I have examined some of the ways the terminology surrounding foster-sibling relationships can change and be misleading. Of the two

⁴⁸⁸ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', pp. 142-43.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 144-45.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 142-43.

⁴⁹¹ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-literature* (Indiana, 1955-58). The references are H 1381.2.2.1.1 and T646.

⁴⁹² Michael Chesnutt, 'The Fatherless Hero in the Playground: Irish Perspectives on the Norse Legend of Sigurd', *Béaloideas* 68 (2000), 33-65.

broad models of foster-sibling creation I have established, the one that seems to create the most vagueness is, unsurprisingly, the educational model. The nutritive, milk fosterage connection, based as it is in the very bodily processes of rearing, allows for less ambiguity. That is not to say that it creates no ambiguity. At the beginning of this section, I examined how foster-sibling bonds can complement blood ties. For Brendan, the connection with his sister forged during their education with Erc, was more important than their blood tie. We have also seen how the wider family can be brought in to aid a foster-sibling. However, the conflict between blood and fosterage ties can lead to disaster, as in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. The disjunction between the sons of Dond Désa and Conaire was articulated through a difference in education. Since the roles of teacher and pupil are open to all, the fosterage based on education can present a confusing hierarchy of father and son. This can be seen for those saints placed in positions of power over their peers through their superior knowledge and ability to teach.

The evidence from saints' lives is surprising given the corporate nature of the monastic existence. While there are some saints who have very close relationships with their peers, for example Maedóc of Ferns and 'another disciple (*deisgiobal*) named Lasrianus ... loved each other very dearly', but this love is very rarely expressed for a peer and even in this case the fosterage terminology is eschewed.⁴⁹³ As we shall see in the next chapter, fosterage was used to describe many relationships of the religious. However, our sources seem more comfortable presenting us with vertical foster relationships. Even among peers the relationships are of superior to subordinate, and eschew the equality of foster-siblinghood. Such an approach is all the more striking when we consider another group, not joined by blood ties, but by ties of common purpose and education: the *flann*. Quinn has drawn out parallels between heroic bands and the education children would receive in a monastery.⁴⁹⁴ In the next section I will

⁴⁹³ BNE, II, p. 178

⁴⁹⁴ Patricia A. Quinn, *Better Than The Sons of Kings: Boys and Monks in the Early Middle Ages* (New York, 1989), pp. 170-72.

demonstrate how the foster-sibling metaphor found greater favour with these roving warriors.

3.5. Fíanna: Where Everyone is a Foster-sibling?

The bond we saw formed between Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad is often characterised as the ideal of foster-brotherhood brought to a tragic conclusion. In my examination of this bond I hinted at the similarities between the training Cú Chulainn and his foster-brothers received with Scáthach and the life of the *flan* members, depicted in the Finn Cycle. One of the central images of Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn's foster-brotherhoods is the image of sharing a bed after journeying in 'every wood and wasteland, every secret place and hidden spot'.⁴⁹⁵ The outdoor nature of the *flan* is succinctly expressed in the episode known as *Raid a Chailti*.⁴⁹⁶ Here Ireland is divided into settled land and material wealth on the one hand, and the wilderness and its wild produce on the other: 'The younger chose the *flan* life, it is not hidden, woodlands and wilderness, cliffs and streams'.⁴⁹⁷ As well as this wilderness location, the two lifestyles centre on bonds of comradeship, shared life and shared education. In this section I will investigate how the *flan* expressed their corporate identity through the medium of foster-siblinghood, even when this relationship involved teaching and differences in power structure. Although not strictly legally fosterage, the community is still described in fosterage terms. The *flan* provides the clearest example of fosterage based on shared experiences, shared learning, and a shared emotional connection. This is not the fosterage found in the law texts, but it is fosterage all the same.

Before I begin discussing the *flan* there is another group of young boys who need to be discussed. The *macrad*, boytroop, appears to be a common feature of royal households in our literature. It is famously said of Conchobur that he passes a third of

⁴⁹⁵ TBC LL, p. 221.

⁴⁹⁶ AnS, pp. 70-3.

⁴⁹⁷ AnS, p. 71.

his day watching the boy troop play.⁴⁹⁸ Time in the *macrad* seems to have formed a distinct stage in the life of a child. There are two legal fragments in the *Mellbretha* and *Macslechte* which make reference to this stage of life coming before a boy took arms and could join the *flan*.⁴⁹⁹ Yet, as Charles-Edwards says, it is unclear how forming part of a *macrad* was related to fosterage.⁵⁰⁰ What appears in some of the texts describing the *macrad* is a temporary association of boys, some of whom may have been in fosterage, some not; which can borrow some tropes from fosterage but does not fully assimilate the vocabulary. In this sense the *macrad* is similar to how the community is described in the saints' lives and also forms a precursor to the types of connection formed in the *flan*.

The *macrad* is the body of youths that Cú Chulainn first faces when he comes to Emain. The head of the troop is Follomain, son of Conchobur, providing a blood tie between the king and his boy-troop. The child is still in the household of his father, which the most marked difference to fosterage, where the child lives away in the household of their fosterers. After Cú Chulainn has laid the boys low they are picked up and comforted by their foster-parents: 'those boys who had been knocked down there rose to their feet, helped by their foster-mother and foster-fathers (*a mummi 7 a n-aiti*)'.⁵⁰¹ The boys come from different blood and foster-families. The *macrad* is also the site of contention between Óengus and Triath; they are playing with the 'lads of the young nobles of Ireland' when they fall out.⁵⁰² The *macrad* plays a more important role in the poetic version of this tale, found in the Book of Leinster.⁵⁰³ The role of Triath is removed and he is replaced by the anonymous *macrad*, demonstrating the similarity – but not equivalence – of the foster-brother and boytroop.

⁴⁹⁸ TBC 1, p. 13

⁴⁹⁹ Daniel A. Binchy, 'Mellbretha', *Celtica* 8 (1968), 144-54; CIH 1546.26-1550.14.

⁵⁰⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 114.

⁵⁰¹ TBC 1, p. 15.

⁵⁰² Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', pp. 142-43.

⁵⁰³ Lucius Gwynn, 'Cináed úa Hartacáin's Poem on Brugh na Bóinne', *Ériu* 7 (1914), 210-238: pp. 224, 233.

The anonymous voice from the boytroop is something seen in *Immram curaig Maíle Dúin*. I will examine the Yellow Book of Lecan version of the tale, which is a rendering of the older version of the tale into Middle Irish made sometime before 1200.⁵⁰⁴ This later text gives fuller voice to the insults and explicitly mentions the *macrad*. One of the *macrad* gets up to criticise Máel Dúin for being too good at all their games: “Well, Máel Dúin”, he said, “you, whose family and kindred are unknown, and who no one knows what hound whelped you on a dungheap, you beat us everywhere in every game, whether we contend at sea or on land or on water or on the draughtboard”.⁵⁰⁵ The interchangeable roles of the fosterlings and the *macrad* show how close these two distinct life stages are in the mind of the writers. Furthermore, there is also evidence of the *macrad* as a place of finer feeling. Follomain leads them out on the *Táin* to save Cú Chulainn and when they are slaughtered Cú Chulainn goes into his frenzy.⁵⁰⁶ Yet, even though there are some similarities between fosterage and *macrad*, they are kept separate; there is no blurring of language between the two.

The members of *fían* were older than those of the *macrad* and here fosterage is more commonly used to understand their relationship to one another. McCone has pointed out that the *fíanna* are the Irish reflex of the Männerbund; that is, the juvenile life stage between youth and assuming one’s place in settled, property owning society.⁵⁰⁷ So the time in the *fían* is said to begin after the child has reached some level of maturity. Within the *fíanaigeacht* this is seen in the case of Mac Lugach. The child is born under suspicious circumstances, either through incest or by an Otherworldly woman. Finn sends the child to his wife to be raised until he is twelve years old, at which point he is armed and heads to join the *fían*.⁵⁰⁸ So time in the *fían* takes place after the child has been fostered, yet before they attain full manhood. Characters within the *fían* may have pre-existing fosterage bonds they would bring with them.

⁵⁰⁴ A. G. van Hamel, ‘The Text of Immram Curaig Maíldúin’, *Études Celtiques* 3 (1938), 1-20.

⁵⁰⁵ *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, ed. Oskamp, pp. 102-03.

⁵⁰⁶ TBC LL, pp. 58-63.

⁵⁰⁷ McCone, ‘Werewolves, Cyclops, *Díberga* and *Fíanna*’, p.13; Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth, 1991), pp. 209-14.

⁵⁰⁸ AnS, p. 16.

Alongside these, though, new bonds can be formed within the *ffian* that are described as foster-sibling ties.

Time in the *ffian* is still a time of growth since the members have not reached full adult status in the eyes of the law. This is a period of transition and the educative and caring space is open for fosterage bonds to be formed, sometimes quite late in life as some characters remain permanently transitional.⁵⁰⁹ As Nagy has said ““Professional” fénnidi such as Finn and Caílte often show a marked interest in the development of the young men and women whom they encounter, and they can actually help youths make the transition from childhood to adulthood by taking them into the *ffian*, where they are guided by mentor fénnidi’.⁵¹⁰ As well as presenting us with vertical foster relationships, the Finn material depicts a body of people connected by deep emotions and acting as equals – the kind of bonds we saw in *Fer Diad* and Cú Chulainn’s time in the wilderness. It presents us with a picture of foster-siblinghood, drawing on the emotional contours of standard fosterage, but playing with identity.

The two central characters in *Acallam na Senórach*, the surviving warriors and interlocutors of Patrick, Caílte and Oisín, represent this play between teacher and equal. As they are the lens through which Patrick’s audience, and by the same token the contemporary and modern audience, experiences the world of the *ffian*, many of the foster relationships focus on them. In the opening to the *Acallam* they appear as foster-brothers, both mourning the passing of the *ffian* with their foster-mother, Cáma. The appreciation of the foster-brother bond through a sense of loss is a central feature of Caílte’s characterisation. In four instances Caílte mourns ‘pining for his comrades and foster-brothers’; ‘he recalled the loss of the friends, the foster-brothers and the great hosts he was formerly with’.⁵¹¹ His grief is for people as well as a way of life. It is illuminating that “friends” and “foster-brothers” are used interchangeably in these examples. The sense of the passing of a world is not limited to Caílte. He meets with a

⁵⁰⁹ Geraldine Parsons, ‘Breaking the Cycle? Accounts of the Death of Finn’, in *The Gaelic Finn Tradition*, ed. By Sharon J. Arbtuhnot and Geraldine Parsons (Dublin, 2011), pp. 81-96.

⁵¹⁰ Nagy, *Wisdom of the Outlaw*, p. 63.

⁵¹¹ AnS, pp. 46, 102, 185, 201.

former companion, Derg Díanscothach, and Derg is cast into grief at the parting of his comrade (*coicle*) and own foster-brother (*comhalta budhéin*). Beyond this grief, the love between foster-brothers is broadened out to the rest of the *ffan* in the next sentence: ‘Even the day on which he parted from Finn and the *ffan* had not been sadder (*nír faide*) than that day’.⁵¹² The loss of a foster-brother is the loss of the *ffan*. That is not to say that all the mourning is vague and of a generic character. Coming across the grave of Diarmait, ‘Caílte placed his weapons on the ground and lay on the tomb and grave of his friend, foster-brother and beloved companion (*a coicli 7 a chomhalta 7 a fir grada*) Diarmait ua Duibne’.⁵¹³ As previously noted, elements of friendship and foster-brotherhood are used side by side. This is a connection that extends throughout their lives, as Caílte ends up naming Diarmait’s children.⁵¹⁴ Again the foster-family makes connections outside the foster-sibling tie.

Caílte and Oisín present a complicated picture of foster relationships. On the one hand they appear as foster-brothers. Since Oisín is Finn’s son, the connection between them is deepened when Caílte is referred to as the foster-son of Finn, in one of the tales about Mongán: ‘It was Caílte, Finn’s foster-son (*dalta*) who had come to them’.⁵¹⁵ Although rarely, they do refer to one another as *comalta* and are called *comalta* by the Diarmait mac Cerbaill, king of Ireland.⁵¹⁶ When Taman Trénbrugaid, the lord hospitaller of Ireland, comes to offer hospitality to Patrick and the two survivors of the *ffan*, Oisín refuses it, because of their giant size. He says, “‘We have eighteen men with us”, said Oisín, “nine with me and nine with my foster-brother (*dom chomalta*) Caílte””.⁵¹⁷ It is interesting to note that in Dooley and Roe’s translation

⁵¹² AnS, p. 53.

⁵¹³ AnS, p. 43.

⁵¹⁴ AnS, p. 43.

⁵¹⁵ *Compert Mongáin and Three Other Early Mongán Tales*, ed. and trans. Nora White (Maynooth: Medieval Irish Texts, 2006). See Appendix 2 for family tree. The dating of this tale and others connected with Mongán is complicated. For more, see John Carey, ‘On the Interrelationships of Some “Cín Dromma Snechtai” Texts’, *Ériu* 46 (1995), 71-92: pp. 73-4.

⁵¹⁶ AnS, p. 65. Though Dooley and Roe translate this as ‘fosterling’ in *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, trans. by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe (Oxford, 1999), p. 71.

⁵¹⁷ AnS, pp. 69-70.

they render *comalta* as ‘foster-father’.⁵¹⁸ This is symptomatic of a tendency in this translation to rationalise the terminology along generational lines that obscures some of the emotional nuance created by the changing terminology.

I will demonstrate how *dalta*, *comalta* and *aite* are used almost interchangeably among the *ffian*, certainly without any regard to generational differences. In the episode, in which Cailte explains to the king of Ireland which of he and Oisín is elder, he says “I am”, said Cailte, “for I was already thirty years old when Oisín was born. He spent seventeen years in my bed (*am leapaíd-sea*), and, after leaving my house, took command of a *ffian* and a band of men”.⁵¹⁹ This hints at Cailte’s mentoring role, taking Oisín into his house and bed until he grows too big and then enters the *ffian* proper. To add a final note of confusion, we have seen that Finn is the head of the *ffian*. He is Cailte’s foster-father. Yet, towards the end of the *Acallam*, Cailte is cured of the various infirmities that have plagued his long life. One of these is the grief for this lost friend, metonymically described as ‘cumha do choicle 7 do chomalta 7 do triath 7 do tigerna .i Fhind meic Cumail sin’ ‘Grief for your friend and your foster-brother and your chieftain and your lord, that is Finn mac Cumail’.⁵²⁰ The tale has a final reversal, affirming the fluid nature of the relationships among the *ffian*, where Finn can be lord and equal.

There are a number of instances in the *Acallam* in which bands of followers are described as foster-siblings. For example, in a poem describing the composition of Finn’s household. ‘In Finn’s house, thrice fifty chiefs of handsome bands,/Two hundred fosterlings (*dá chét dalta dingbala*), three hundred servants’.⁵²¹ This has been interpreted by Nagy as pointing to the idea of “seniors” and “juniors” among the *ffian*, which reflects its role in finishing the education of the youths of Ireland; completing that final shift to adulthood.⁵²² It is interesting to note that the fosterlings are placed

⁵¹⁸ *Tales*, trans. Dooley and Roe, p. 75.

⁵¹⁹ AnS, p. 70.

⁵²⁰ AnS, p. 199

⁵²¹ AnS, p. 6

⁵²² Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes’, p. 182.

alongside servants. This recalls the servile element to fosterage, previously discussed, and how Moling acts as a servant to his fellow pupils. In other sections of the *Acallam* foster-brothers are placed in sequences that recall the companions that Cailte and Oisín had in the past.

Some members of the *flan* bring pre-existing foster relationships with them to the *flan*. Some tales refer to other fosterage arrangements, for example, the fosterage networks that exist in the *síd*.⁵²³ Yet there is one tale, a tragic episode etymologising the Tomb of the Warriors, the Mound of the Womenfolk, and the Tomb of the Boys, where the foster-siblings ties inside and outside of the *flan* form an interesting nexus. In the tale Finn takes as his wife, Sadb, who, unreasonably (in the mind of Finn) asks that he spend half the year with her. While Finn is out raiding he realises that he has been remiss so sends her four foster-brothers to appease her: ‘who would be more fitting to send her than her four foster-brothers (*a cethrur comalta fein*)’.⁵²⁴ In a striking juxtaposition, Finn addresses this comment to Sadb’s blood brother, Ferdoman. In this case it seems that to persuade and cajole, the foster-sibling bond is preferred to the natal one. Such a view is not Finn’s alone, as Sadb’s brother implicitly agrees to this judgement. In the mind of Finn and the author, fosterage is more emotionally resonant than blood ties; the foster-brothers have a better chance at changing their foster-sister’s mind than her brother. That is not to say that blood ties are wholly abandoned. Sadb’s foster-brothers are two sets of natal brothers, the sons of Dub and the sons of Conn. Their devotion to each other as foster-brothers overlaps with their ties of blood. We have seen this combination of blood and foster ties earlier in this chapter, in the discussion of Brendan and his sister.

However, these foster ties are not the only ones involved in this episode. The foster-brother messengers come from Finn’s band of companions. Given what I have said above about the foster-like bonds that exist among the *flan*, this complicates the picture. The foster ties between the sons of Dub and the sons of Conn, exist alongside

⁵²³ Lir exhorts his fellows to carry their dead ‘friends and foster brothers’ back their various *síd* (AnS, p. 142) and Fer Maissi is said to be ‘dalta Fergusu’ (AnS, p. 191).

⁵²⁴ AnS, p. 79.

their fosterage bonds formed within the *ffian*, as well as their blood ties. Cailte says of the four foster-brothers ‘whenever there was no woman in Finn’s bed (*lebaid*), these are the ones who were with him’.⁵²⁵ Bed sharing is a sign of close emotional connection, as well as one of the ways foster-brotherhood was formed.

The foster-like imagery extends to the death of the foster-brothers. One pair is killed by Goll and Clann Morna, the others die of grief for their foster-brothers, as we have examined in chapter two. When Finn arrives ‘his weapons fell from his hands and he wept flowing, pitiful showers of tears so that his shirt was wet above his breast (*os bruinde dó*) and all the *ffian* wept in the same way’.⁵²⁶ These acts of grief mirror those of Cailte for his foster-brothers and the inclusion of the rest of the *ffian* in the performance of this grief deeply, emotionally connects these dead brothers with the whole *ffian*. The fosterage terminology, though, is reserved for the four who were foster-siblings before the *ffian*. Fosterage in the *ffian* is complicated. Foster-sibling bonds can exist before the *ffian* and persist through the time there; foster-bonds can be formed among specific members of the *ffian*, shifting between vertical and horizontal bonds; finally, all the *ffian* exists in a foster-like relationship with one another.

In this section I have examined how groups of young people, primarily young men, were presented in medieval Irish literature. The younger *macrad* holds an unusual place, given the age of the boys and how it seemed to lie outside and overlap with the familial or fosterage unit. Yet even here there are hints of similarities between how relationships among the *macrad* are presented and the foster-sibling bonds. This appropriation of foster-sibling language and behaviour finds its fullest expression among the *ffian*. The literature known as *ffianaigecht* emerges in the twelfth century, presenting a group of young men, learning from each other and living with each other on the borders of society. The bonds that form among them are the same as fosterage, although without a legal contract.

⁵²⁵ AnS, p. 79.

⁵²⁶ AnS, p. 80.

The *flan* appear to use foster-sibling terminology more than the comparable group of extra-social men in the monasteries. Yet this does not preclude some fluid use of fosterling, foster-brother and foster-father terms. I suggest, though, that these more unusual appellations are indicative of nuances within a broadly equal social framework. The deeply felt emotional ties between the members of the *flan*, living together, learning from one another, and sharing in many experiences, creates the same emotional ties as fosterage. The emotional community of fosterage is not just restricted to those within the legal contract. This chapter has shown how the emotional bonds characterise fosterage, allowing similar emotional bonds to be thought of as fosterage. Our model of foster-sibling relationships is given nuance when we appreciate how the *flan* relationships are foster-like.

There are commonalities here to Cú Chulainn's education. The parallels between Scáthach and Búanann, the *mumme na flan*, have been made by Nagy.⁵²⁷ The corporate identity of the *flan* is also something we see expressed of poets. Muirenn is called the *muime na cleri* in *Tromdámh Guaire*.⁵²⁸ In this text the poets are a band, joined together by their profession, but they never refer to one another as foster-siblings: any foster-relationships that appear are vertical ones. It is interesting to note that even in examples where one would assume that a corporate identity would employ the fosterage metaphor to explain their relationships, the foster-sibling element is neglected. Yet the appearance of Muirenn, Búannan, and Scáthach, as overseers of almost exclusively male corporate identities based on the transfer of knowledge, works to link the two models of foster-sibling creation I have outlined in the beginning: the nutritive and educative. It is to this synthesis of these models that I will turn in my conclusion.

⁵²⁷ Nagy, *Wisdom of the Outlaw*, p. 102.

⁵²⁸ *Tromdámh Guaire*, ed. Joynt, p. 7 et passim.

3.6. Conclusion

In order to examine the role of foster-siblings in the emotional community of fosterage, I have attempted to define a foster-sibling. Although it would, at first glance, appear to be a straight forward question, we have seen that a clear definition is hard to come by. The legal bounds of fosterage have been established by other scholars, based on fragmentary law codes, but this does not fully encapsulate what is meant when a character is called a foster-sibling. Indeed, it is even hard to come up with a stable definition of a foster-sibling from the law tracts. As we have seen from the discussion of the legal material, the concentration of the lawyers was on the parents who are involved in taking the child. As Charles-Edwards says of the different relationships involved in the fosterage bond ‘the most formal and legal in character was that between natural parent and foster-parent’.⁵²⁹ The relationship that does not receive much legal attention is that between foster-siblings. Their relationship is not legally circumscribed and as such foster-sibling terminology can be used in a more fluid fashion. The question of who is a sibling in any case, is an open question.⁵³⁰

There is a difference between nursing a child at the breast and taking in an older child to educate, as we saw in the previous chapters. The two acts also shape how foster-sibling relationships are created, as we would expect. We have seen that the emotional bond between foster-siblings can be created through a shared education or through a shared breast. The shared breast seems the most emotionally resonant, combining the love of the foster-mother as well as a shared infancy, a longer period of growing together for the foster-siblings. Yet the precedence of the breast as a site for creating the bond brings troubles of its own. Blood and foster-relationships can spiral out of the close family to include distant brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles. In this case it is interesting to see who is brought into the ambit of foster-siblinghood and who

⁵²⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 80.

⁵³⁰ Rosalind Edwards and others, *Who is a Sister and a Brother? Biological and Social Ties* (London, 2005).

excluded. This is especially relevant when one's foster-sibling is also one's natal sibling. However, more than this, the image is complicated by the provision of education among the close family. We saw this in the way Emer passed on her embroidery skills to her attendant foster-sisters.

That education was a key part of fosterage was discussed in the first chapter, where the nobles of Ulster compete to foster Cú Chulainn by demonstrating what they can teach him. Yet, by basing the fosterage bond on education, the focus remains on the vertical relationships. The teacher takes in a pupil to whom they pass their knowledge. There is little space here for the creation of horizontal connections, let alone horizontal teaching opportunities. For Cú Chulainn, the time in Alba is envisaged as a time of education in which he forms these horizontal bonds. This is merely an image, though. As I have demonstrated in the *Fer Diad* section, it is a time recalled but never described. In those instances, in which the education is described, it falls, once more, into the hierarchies of teacher and taught. It is difficult for the authors to use education to create an emotional tie. So Conaire, in teaching his foster-brothers, distances himself from them and hagiography is replete with power struggles between teacher and taught, between more and less holy. The foster-sibling relationship includes tensions of class and precedence. Such tensions are elaborated through innovative use of language, the shifts in the relationship expressed through shifts in terminology. By examining these shifts, we see some of the struggles within the emotional community and deepen our understanding of that community.

The one instance in which this educative model does not wholly devolve into a quasi-parental relationship is in the *ffian*. Here, when all are placed on an equal legal footing, outside settled society, the over-arching metaphor is one of foster-brotherhood. Within that, of course, there are changes in power, which can be signified by changes in names, but education and emotion seem to be united in this instance. If we are to take the milk fosterage as the more immediately emotional one, then it is worth noting that the *ffian* is presided over by *muime* in the same way that Scáthach stands as a maternal presence for those warriors she teaches. The most

successful invocations of the foster-brother relationship are those that combine both the nutritive and the educational model – not that the two models stand firmly isolated at any point. As in the previous chapters the foster-sibling relationships take much of their force and structure from the other fosterage bonds. These ties cannot be examined in isolation.

The answer to the question who is a foster-sibling was never going to be a neat one. I have demonstrated that a serious discussion of the fosterage terminology, examining when it is used and when it is not, allows us to see how these very close bonds were formed. Here, more so than in previous chapters, the importance of the emotional ties to creating fosterage, even outside the legally defined foster-family, can be seen. Who counts as a foster-sibling is as much a reflection of feeling as a hard definition.

4. Fosterage in the Medieval Irish Church

4.1. Introduction

The foregoing chapters have been concerned with the emotional ties between members of the foster-family. Yet, as we saw towards the end of the previous chapter on foster-sibling relationships, the metaphor of fosterage can be used outside of the foster-family. I have examined how the monastic education was approached in terms of fosterage, even if this fosterage language was used to reinforce the superiority and individual nature of a saint. In this chapter, the analysis will focus on how foster relationships between children and adults were presented in religious sources. Kerlouégan has noted how some of the fosterage language was used and Parkes saw an appreciable difference between secular and ecclesiastical fosterage.⁵³¹ I will argue that the differences between secular and ecclesiastical fosterage were less marked than previously thought. The relationships created were as emotionally resonant as those described in the preceding chapters and founded on similar principles of shared education and experience. Investigating which relationships were presented as fosterage, illuminates the emotional tenor of those relationships.

Fosterage was also used as a mystical metaphor. I shall begin this chapter with a discussion of how religious interacted with the figure of the Christ Child. I will ask why we see the emotional bond with the Christ Child so early in medieval Irish literature. Why was it that the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas was embraced by the medieval Irish so readily that by the seventh century there was a poetical retelling written in the vernacular?⁵³² That devotion to the Christ Child was framed in terms of

⁵³¹ François Kerlouégan, 'Essai sur la mise en nourriture et l'éducation dans les pays celtiques d'après le témoignage des textes hagiographiques Latins', *Etudes Celtiques* 12 (1968-71), 101-146; Parkes, 'Celtic Fosterage', pp. 370-74.

⁵³² James Carney, 'Two Old Irish Poems', *Ériu* 18 (1958) 1-43: p. 4

fosterage, shows us how the metaphor of fosterage was used, what kind of relationships it was best thought to describe.

The early appearance of this type of devotion in Ireland is surprising. The popularity of Christ as a babe in arms finds its fullest expression from the late eleventh century as part of the humanising trend that devotion to Christ underwent. In the words of MacLehose 'At that time, Christian devotional emphasis began to shift from a view of Christ as a largely distant, judging, patriarchal figure to a newly articulated sense of the approachable, loving, human Jesus'.⁵³³ As part of this humanising trend a greater emphasis was placed on the less than imposing image of Christ as a young child. David Herlihy sees this as coming, initially, from a Cistercian context: 'The Cistercian cult of the Child Jesus suggests, in other words, that lay persons, too, were finding the contemplation of children emotionally rewarding'.⁵³⁴ Herlihy's view, in privileging the biological family, is not wholly compatible with the current study. We have seen how fosterage creates similarly strong bonds and means of thinking about adult/child relationships. The image of the Christ Child did undergo a number of changes from the twelfth century: 'the Infant Jesus leapt out of his Byzantine impassivity and became recognisably infantile, laughing, sucking the pap, or playing with fruit and toys'.⁵³⁵ However, to students of medieval Irish literature such a change in the twelfth century has been anticipated by much earlier developments.

These earlier developments are clearly articulated in an Old Irish poem. Commonly referred to as *Ísucán*, in this short poem of six stanzas the speaker addresses Ísucán, the little Jesus, the Christ Child. The speaker goes on to describe the deep affection felt for the little babe that they are suckling at their breast. While this would appear to be quite a normal poem for the twelfth or thirteenth century the putative

⁵³³ William F. MacLehose, 'The Holy Tooth: Dentition, Childhood Development, and the Cult of the Christ Child', in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et Omega*, ed. by Mary Dzon and Theresa Kenney, (Toronto, 2012), pp. 201-223: p. 201.

⁵³⁴ David Herlihy, *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical essays, 1978-1991* (Providence, 1995), p. 240.

⁵³⁵ Leah S. Marcus, *Childhood and Cultural Despair: A Theme and Variations in Seventeenth Century Literature* (Pittsburgh, 1978), p. 17.

date of c. 900 as suggested by Murphy, would make this one of the earliest examples of such an approach to the Christ Child.⁵³⁶ I shall provide an appraisal of this poem and the prose introduction to it that demonstrates the central role fosterage has in framing the emotional relationship of the Christ Child to the speaker of the poem – Íte according to the introduction.

From this close reading of the poem, I will move to discuss similar miracles of the Christ Child appearing to Irish saints and show how, once again, fosterage was the lens through which these visitations were understood. Yet, what is striking in these examples is the way the saint, the foster-parent, is seen as taking the active role. The Christ Child is not the subject at all, something that contrasts with Dzon's view of the emerging characterisation of the Christ Child. Discussing this figure in later medieval texts she has said 'Both of these versions of the boy Jesus – the helpless and the spirited – captured the Christian imagination in the later Middle Ages. The Child of the apocryphal legends – an independent subject, unconventional in many ways – seems modern, a harbinger of child characters of more recent works'.⁵³⁷ What is more important, in the texts showing the Christ Child interacting with the saint, is the interaction itself. What is being shown to the audience is not an aspect of Christ as represented by his incarnation in the body of a child, but rather one of the means by which a mortal can interact with God. We are not concerned with the increased humanisation of the Godhead itself but rather the audience is presented with two models to follow. The first model presents a close affective relationship to God expressed in familial terms that do not call upon a blood connection. Fosterage allows the saint to relate to God in a deeply affective manner, without the conceptual difficulty of creating a biological link. The second is a valorised portrayal of how these adults can interact with children under their care.

⁵³⁶ *Early Irish Lyrics: Eighth to Twelfth Century*, trans. by Gerard Murphy (Oxford, 1956), p. 183; Quin, 'Ísucán', p. 43; FO, p. 36.

⁵³⁷ Mary Dzon, 'Boys Will Be Boys: The physiology of childhood and the apocryphal Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages', *Viator* 42 (2011), 179-225: p.222.

The ideal relationship with the Christ Child, and how it is described, will affect the way mortal relationships were thought to work. Once we have seen how the image of the fostered Christ Child was presented, both in the *Ísucán* poem and elsewhere, I turn to hagiographic examples of children in monasteries. In the last chapter we saw how Moling was taken and taught by Collanach and this is far from an isolated example. I will begin this second half of the chapter with three tales that miraculously combine the nutritive and educative elements of fosterage. These tales of male saints miraculously lactating to feed the children they have taken into their monasteries have much to say about the relationships created through education as well as the vexed role of gender in raising children in a monastic environment.

However not all children were taken in as babes in arms, but were often taken in at seven years of age.⁵³⁸ Taking a child into a monastery at this age will lead to comparisons with oblation.⁵³⁹ There are two main differences between oblation and monastic fosterage that emerge in this chapter. Oblation is a gift the parents of the child make to God; the child is handed over as an offering. This contrasts with the human contract of fosterage. Secondly, when the oblate is consecrated it is for life, whereas fosterage, while creating life-long ties of affection, as a legal bond is only temporary.⁵⁴⁰ In reviewing examples of children raised in the monastery, I will demonstrate the power of fosterage in the medieval Irish mental world. It provides the model for the education given in a monastery and for the relationships forged by association therein.⁵⁴¹ However, it is flexible enough to encompass relationships that differ from the model of fosterage already discussed. This includes oblation-like relationships, solely educational ones, and purely nutritive ones.

⁵³⁸ See Introduction §0.4.

⁵³⁹ A similarity has been pointed out by Boswell, who sees a hybrid of oblation and fosterage. John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Chicago, 1988), p. 253.

⁵⁴⁰ Quinn, *Better Than The Sons of Kings*, pp. 32-4.

⁵⁴¹ Garver has examined how Carolingian education effected childrearing in the ninth and tenth centuries. Valerie Garver, 'The Influence of Monastic Ideals upon Carolingian Conceptions of Childhood', in *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (Berlin, 2005), pp. 67-86.

Examining the devotion to the Christ Child through the lens of fosterage allows me to explain why such devotion appeared so early in Irish sources, when it found its full flourishing much later on the Continent. We can also read these encounters with the Christ Child in the other direction, as it were. By examining fosterage primarily through the way religious were thought to interact the Christ Child, we can see an ideal of the fosterage relationship. This image of how fosterage was supposed to work in a monastic setting is something that I investigate in the second half of the chapter. Monastic fosterage can be thought of as similar to the secondary fosterage discussed in chapter one. There is a concentration on the educative role of fosterage and children seem to come to the monastery after being raised elsewhere, either in the home or fostered by another family. Yet the examples of miraculous breastfeeding show that the nutritive element of fosterage was still a concern. Monastic fosterage was not strictly the same as the secular institution, although it drew heavily on the practices of fosterage. In the space between metaphor and lived experience we see the child in the medieval Irish monastery. Its fosterage was not confined to the secular space and we cannot recreate a picture of the emotional community of fosterage without examining how it functioned in a religious setting.

4.2. Ísucán

The case study that will form the basis of the first half of this chapter is the Old Irish poem *Ísucán*. The poem survives in six manuscripts all from the fifteenth century with the exception of Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale 5100-4, which is from the seventeenth.⁵⁴² The poem is always preserved alongside a prose introduction explaining the reasons for Íte's composing the verse. The prose introduction is written in Middle Irish so would seem to have been added to the lore surrounding the poem at a later

⁵⁴² Leabhar Breac (RIA MS 23 P 16), f. 79; Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, 5100-4, p. 80; Book of Lecan (RIA MS 23 P 2), f. 166v; UCD, MS A 7, f. 7ra; Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 610, f. 61ra; RIA MS 23 P 3, f. 12v.

date. The attribution of the poem to Íte was clearly traditional by the time the prose introduction was appended to the poem, as there is nothing in the six verses that makes it clear that the speaker is a woman. Both the prose and the poem are usually preserved as part of the extensive notes appended to the *Félire Óengusso*, the Martyrology of Oengus.⁵⁴³ This is a verse calendar describing which saint should be venerated on each day. For the verse on 15 January there is a couplet referring to Íte and the prose tale is added in the notes to explain the line 'Foráith már ñgur ñgalar' 'She succoured many grievous diseases'.⁵⁴⁴ However for the Book of Lecan and RIA Ms 23 P 3 manuscripts the story appears apart from the *Félire*.

In these last two manuscripts, the tale stands alone. In the Book of Lecan it is found between a tale of Cormac mac Airt and the witches from Scotland and a tract on the genealogies of the twelve apostles. In MS 23 P 3, it comes alongside other fragments. Although these fragments appear to come from the notes to the *Félire* they are separated from the version of the *Félire*, preserved earlier in the manuscript (fo. 1-10). In order to reinforce the tale's separate nature, it begins with an illuminated initial and a later hand has given it a title. In this manuscript the tale of Íte composing the poem was treated as a discrete entity, separate from the *Félire*. This episode does not, however, appear in the Laitn Life of Íte or in the lives of those saints she fosters.⁵⁴⁵ In those texts, her role as foster-mother is confined to human, future saints such as Brendan and Mochóemóg.

The conceit of the poem is that the speaker is nurturing or fostering the baby Jesus, the hypocoristic *Ísucán* of the modern title. The accompanying translation is my own, but it must be noted that translating such a laconic poem presents us with a number of difficulties, not least of which is trying to render all the diminutives naturally. In creating this more literal translation I am drawing on Quin's work:⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴³ Ó Riain has dated the composition of the later commentary to the 1170s. Pádraig Ó Riain, 'The Martyrology of Óengus: The Transmission of the Text', *Studia Hibernica* 31 (2000-2001), 221-42.

⁵⁴⁴ FO, p. 36.

⁵⁴⁵ VSH II, pp. 116-30; Brendan VSH I, 98-151; Mochóemóg VSH II, pp. 164-83.

⁵⁴⁶ This is the edition of the poem to be found in Quin, *Ísucán*, p. 43.

Ísucán alar limm im dísertán cía beith clérech co llín sét is bréc uile acht Ísucán	Little Jesus I foster him in my little cell Although a priest has much wealth All is a lie except little Jesus
Altram alar limm im thaig ní altram nach doérrathaig Ísu co feraib nime frim chride cach n-oénadaig.	The fosterage I fostered in my home Is not the fosterage of a churl ⁵⁴⁷ Jesus with the hosts of Heaven By my heart every single night.
Ísucán oc mo bithmaith ernaíd ocus ní maithmech, in rí con-icc na uili cen a guidi bid aithrech.	Little Jesus, ever for my benefit He bestows and does not remit, ⁵⁴⁸ The King who has power over all Those who do not pray to him will have regret
Ísu úasal ainglide nícon clérech dergnaide alar lemm in dísertán Ísu mac na Ebraide.	Noble, angelic Jesus, He is not an ordinary priest Who I have fostered in my little cell, Jesus son of the Jewish woman.
Maic na ruirech maic na rí im thír vía do-ísatán ní úaidib saílim sochor is tochu limm Ísucán.	The sons of high-kings and the sons of kings, Though they come to my land, I do not expect a good contract from them. I have better hope with little Jesus.
Canaid cóir a ingena d'fiur dlíges for císucán attá na purt túasacán cía beith im ucht Ísucán.	Sing well, oh maidens, To the rightful owner of your tribute Little Jesus is at home above Though he is on my bosom.

For a short poem, *Ísucán* has attracted a large amount of critical attention. If, in 1981, 'it may well be asked what remains to be said about it' then what hope do we have in the following century?⁵⁴⁹ However, the previous comments on the poem have concentrated on the linguistic features of the poem and have critically engaged with only some aspects of its content. Greene and O'Connor are content to say 'an Irish poet of the old school would have raised his eyebrows at the ingenuousness of this little poem ... but it keeps its charm'.⁵⁵⁰ Even in his deep critical study of the poem, Quin

⁵⁴⁷ The compound *doérraithech* is made up of *doér* (unfree) and *aithech* (commoner, client). This is striking in the context of fosterage. While fosterage was wide-spread, and seems to be apply to all ranks of free people, *Cáin Íarraith* gives no provision for it extending to the unfree classes.

⁵⁴⁸ This is a particularly difficult line to interpret, and will be fully addressed below.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 40

⁵⁵⁰ Greene and O'Connor, *A Golden Treasury*, p. 102.

only makes passing comment on the wider context of the poem. His focus is on the six stanzas, whereas I will critically engage with the prose introduction and other imagery of the child Christ in Irish literature. In this context I shall demonstrate how the social metaphor of fosterage was central to understanding to the intimate relationship with Christ.

The poem has been read as a careful construction, drawing on legal language in order to express the relationship between client and lord - a feature found elsewhere in Irish religious poetry.⁵⁵¹ Quin draws out this legal metaphor but does not adequately explain the paradox of the cliental relationship that exists between a child and an adult. While the paradox of the all-powerful Christ Child is a common motif, it is presented here in an uncommon fashion. The focus in the poem is less on the figure of the child as a lord to whom dues are rendered – though, of course, this is a feature of the poem – but instead on the power the saint/fosterer has over the Christ/child. This too is framed in legal language as fosterage has its own sense of obligation and counter-obligation. Such a notion finds its fullest resolution in the image of the tender fosterling who is rightful owner of tribute. The fosterage system, in which the child may well be of a higher social rank than its fosterer, gives a more complex and nuanced expression to the paradoxes of power embodied in the figure of the Christ Child. The poem is both understood through fosterage and gives us a deeper understanding of how that system worked.

Let us now examine the legal metaphor in the poem. In the words of Quin 'a number of legal metaphors can in fact be observed, and these to a large extent set the tone of the poem'.⁵⁵² The most challenging of these metaphors can be seen in line two of stanza three. This line seems to be the clearest expression of the lord/client relationship, yet it is also the line most altered and adapted across the different manuscripts. The translation given by Quin is '[Jesus] grants and remits not'. To explain this, he cites two other passages in which the sense is that God grants favours and

⁵⁵¹ David Greene, 'St Brigid's Alefeast', *Celtica* 2 (1952), 150-53.

⁵⁵² Quin, '*Ísucán*', p. 40.

expects true recompense for his largesse.⁵⁵³ In itself, this is not a controversial reading, as it is the expected moral to take from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 and the parable of the minas in Luke 19. Yet it stands out from the tone of the rest of the poem which concentrates on the fosterage metaphor. How, then, should it be read?

Within the poem itself there are multiple references to the good contract that the speaker is receiving from Jesus, in contrast to those offered by the sons of ordinary men. While it is not made explicit what particular contract is being referred to, the language of the poem is constantly making references to fosterage, seen in half the stanzas. This is made clearest in line five with the emphatic *figura etymologica*: 'altram alar limm' 'the fosterage I fostered'. This impression is reinforced in the final stanza when Jesus's dwelling in heaven is contrasted with his presence on the breast of the speaker. We have seen that the child on the breast is a metonym for fosterage. Here, as in the birth tales of Cú Chulainn, the gender-neutral 'chest/lap', *ucht*, is used in preference to the feminine 'breast', *cích*. In line seventeen the sons of high kings and kings have come to the speaker and the contract that they offer is not as good as that from Jesus. The concentration on children, 'the sons of high-kings and kings' '*maic na ruirech maic na rí*', suggests that it is the fosterer's affective relationship with children, rather than the kings and high kings themselves, that is drawn on.

The problem line two of stanza three remains amid the overwhelming fosterage imagery. In such a tightly structured piece of work, although its presence does not directly trouble reading focusing on fosterage, it does bear considering. Succour is to be found in the medieval Irish response to the line, which seems equally perplexed. It is the line that has received the most alteration in the poem. In Laud 610 and its sister manuscript the line has been changed to 'ara airi isni maithmech'.⁵⁵⁴ Stokes translated this line as 'for heed of Him he is not slack', taking the meaning of 'slack, remiss' for *maithmech* to be found in *Féilire Húi Gormáin*.⁵⁵⁵ This would seem to be an attempt to

⁵⁵³ Kuno Meyer, 'Mitteilungn aus irischen Handschriften', *ZCP* 12 (1918), 290-97: p. 296; 'The Duties of a Husbandman', *Ériu* 2 (1905), 172.

⁵⁵⁴ Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Misc. 610, f. 61^r col. 1; Royal Irish Academy, MS. 23 P 3, f. 12^v.

⁵⁵⁵ *Féilire Húi Gormáin: The Martyrology of Gorman*, ed. by Whitley Stokes (London, 1895), p. 281.

simplify the confusion generated by the odd line. The sense that this correction gives is that because the speaker is intent on looking out for Jesus, Jesus, in turn, is not slack with his rewards. In the Book of Lecan, however, the opening couplet of this stanza is completely altered to 'Ísucán i cas|taob ris nocho n-aithrech'.⁵⁵⁶ I translate this: 'Little Jesus, in times of trouble|relying on him is no regret'. The manuscript also seems to offer a variant reading, adding after the end of the stanza 'nocho cleir'. This addition, separated by a mark would replace the 'nocho n-aith' and seems to be a common practice in this version of the poem. The variant reading is translated 'relying on him is not a cleric', which reinforces the contrast between Jesus and the clergy that we see elsewhere in the poem.

All the alterations above show the scribes eschewing the legal metaphor of client and lord, while retaining the sense of the stanza. Such a view is more intelligible when the poem is placed in the context of the prose introduction. The prose has received comparatively little critical attention, especially in light of the amount of material concentrating on the poem alone. It explains the occasion for the poem's composition, and the reason for its attribution to Íte, even though the poetic voice has no obvious gendered markings. The narrative is short enough to quote in full:

Foraith mor ngur ngalar .i. ro fortachtaig Dia di nó ro reithistar mor ngalair .i. ár ba mor in galur di, dael oc a diul méitighther oirce ro chlóid a lethtaeb uile, ní fitir nech sin furri. Téit fecht n-óen amach: tic in dael assa fochlai dia heis. Atchiat na caillecha hé 7 marbait didu hé. Tic-si iarsin [7] ór na tainic sim didu iarfaigis, "Cid dochuaid mo dalta? "ar sí, "7 cia dusfaraill hé?" "Na gat nam foirnd", ar na caillecha, "7 sinde ro marb hé, 7 ní fetamur nabbo urchoitech hé". "Cid fil ann didu", ar sí, "acht ní geba caillech tre bithu mo chomarbus issin ngnim sin, 7 ní geb-sa didu," ar isi, "óm Thigerna, co tuca [a Mac] a nim a richt naíden dia altraim dam dono". Co tainic in t-aingel no gnathaiged timthirecht disi ara hamus. "Mithig em," atbered sí fris. Co n-erbairt fria, "Doberthar duit inní conaighi." Co tainic Críst chuici a richt naíden. Conid ann atbert si.⁵⁵⁷

She underwent much bitter illness i.e. God helped her or much illness overcame her, i.e. because it was a great affliction to her that a beetle the size of a lapdog was suckling at her such that it had destroyed her whole side.⁵⁵⁸ No one knew what was happening to her. Once she went out. The beetle came out of its hiding place when she had left. The nuns saw it and killed

⁵⁵⁶ RIA, MS. 23 P 2, f. 166^v col. 3.

⁵⁵⁷ FO, pp. 42-44.

⁵⁵⁸ The translation of 'side' here is that most commonly assigned to *taeb*. However, the word has been seen to take on a wider frame of reference. The prefix *leth-* 'half, one of two' specifically locates the beetle's sucking on one side.

it. She returned and when it did not come to her, she asked "Where has my fosterling gone?" she said, "and who has touched him?" "Do not deprive us of heaven", said the nuns, "it is we who killed him, for we did not know anything except that it was harmful". "Though that is so", she said, "as a result of this deed no nun will ever succeed me. I will also not take anything", she said, "from my Lord, unless He give me His Son from heaven in the form of child to foster". Then the angel that used to attend her came to her. "You will be given what you ask for". Then Christ came to her in the form of a child. Then she said: [the poem].⁵⁵⁹

The prologue takes the fosterage imagery of the poem and makes it the central conceit of the piece. Íte calls the beetle her fosterling, '*dalta*' and her reaction to its death is a combination of saintly rage and the foster-maternal grief we have examined in chapter two. The beetle is also said to have fed on her so much that half her side has been destroyed. This striking image also includes allusions of nutritive fostering. *Deól* is the verbal noun of *dinid*, 'sucks', a verb most commonly used of calves and their mothers.⁵⁶⁰ The imagery is that of nutritive care, emanating from the breast, a common feature of the presentation of foster-mothers. Although the verb is commonly used for maternal animals, clearly we are not dealing with a mother and child here which further reinforces the fosterage image.⁵⁶¹ As would be expected in this case, the semantic range of *deól* moves beyond nutrition to affection. Keating uses it to mean 'fond' and it appears in a compound in one of the lives of Cóemgen to mean 'soothing'.⁵⁶² However, it does not seem to be the most readily applicable verb to the action of a beetle. Indeed, there is only one other instance of a beetle sucking in such a fashion and that is in quite a different setting. It is in a poem lamenting the death of Áed mac Domnaill:

Dursan, a Chomghaill na cceól,
mac Domnaill do dheól don dáol,
dursan a oinech re lár,
dursan Ailech án gen Áod!⁵⁶³

Alas, oh Comgall of the songs,
The beetle is eating the son of Domnall,
Alas, his face on the ground,
Alas, noble Ailech without Áed!

⁵⁵⁹ Quin, '*Ísucán*', p. 41.

⁵⁶⁰ eDIL s.v. *dinid*.

⁵⁶¹ A good example of this is to be found in Broccán's hymn to Brigit: 'lia máthair dith ind lóeg' 'the calf sucked at its mother' (*Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A collection of Old Irish glosses, scholia, prose and verse*, ed. by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, 2 vols (Dublin, 1903) II, p. 346).

⁵⁶² Seithrún Céitinn 'do mhúirnín deoil' 'your beloved babe' in the poem *Fáidhdréagach an saoghal so*. MacErlan, Rev. J. C., *Dánta, Amhráin is Caóinte Sheathruin Céitinn*, (Dublin, 1900), p. 34; BNE, I, p. 163.

⁵⁶³ Kuno Meyer, '*A Medley of Irish Texts*' in *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie*, 3 vols. (Halle, 1900-07), III (1907), p. 304.

This image of the feeding beetle is directly negative and associated with death and decay. It is interesting to note that the phrase used in the second line to describe the beetle is the same as that used in Íte's tale: 'dheól don dáol' and 'deal oc a diul'. In this poem, the beetle takes on its more usual, negative role: a symbol of death which is associated with the decay of the body.⁵⁶⁴ As such the collocation of beetle, as symbol of death, and life-giving suckling is particularly striking. In the poem such a juxtaposition could be explained away by a concern for alliteration and poetic diction. In the case of Íte's tale there are no such restraints on word choice so the language choice deserves further examination. The beetle is used as a way to increase the severity of her ascetic practices. She is being eaten by a representative of death, so much so that it is destroying her side. The negative implications of the beetle can also be seen in the reaction of the nuns, the response of anyone not gifted with Íte's remarkable, saintly insight. They kill the beetle, saying 'ni fetamur nabbo urchoitech hé' 'we did not know but that it was harmful'. Interestingly the term for 'harmful', *urchoitech*, is also used in a homily preserved in the Leabhar Breac to describe the locusts of the Egyptian plague: 'locusts ... its teeth are harmful (*urchoitech*)'.⁵⁶⁵ The linguistic choices made in this introduction play on ideas of Biblical affliction which accord with Íte's ascetic practices.⁵⁶⁶ The beetle is said to destroy half her side, *a lethtaeb*, and Ingridsdotter has pointed out the sexual and generative associations of 'side', *taeb*.⁵⁶⁷ The language of Íte's suffering plays on ideas of frightful consumption and generation, a negative version of the nutritive nature of fosterage.

Viewed in the light of Christ Child devotions, we can see allusions to the fifth wound of Christ in the suffering of the side of the saint.⁵⁶⁸ Aside from making Íte's

⁵⁶⁴ eDIL, s.v. doél.

⁵⁶⁵ *The Passions and the Homilies*, pp. 254-55. The Leabhar Breac was composed early in the fifteenth century, before 1411 (Timothy O'Neill, *The Irish Hand* (Portlaoise, 1984), p. 42).

⁵⁶⁶ VSH, II, p. 119.

⁵⁶⁷ Ingridsdotter, *Aided Derbforaill*, p. 23.

⁵⁶⁸ For verbal links, see the third passion of Christ in the Leabhar Breac 'Gabaid tra oen ele do na míledu góí, 7 do-rat buille de i toeb ndess Ísu, co tanic fuil 7 usce ass' 'Another one of the soldiers took up a spear and struck it in the right side of Jesus, so that blood and water came from it' (*The Passions and the Homilies*, p. 134)

suffering all the more noble through association with the Saviour, Christ's fifth wound is commonly associated with his nutritive role, although the image of suckling at the side of Christ gains prominence in a later period, certainly in art, as pointed out by Bynum.⁵⁶⁹ The close connection between the wounded side of Christ and the idea of nutritive feeding is most clearly exemplified in this quotation from Arnold of Bonneval (d. after 1159): 'Man now has a secure access to God, where he has the Son as Mediator of his cause before the Father, and before the Son the mother. Christ, His side being laid bare, showed to the Father His side and His wounds (*latus et vulerna*): Mary [showed] to Christ her bosom and her breast (*pectus et ubera*).'⁵⁷⁰ Here the side and wounds of Christ are equated with the nutritive breasts of Mary. The depiction of Íte's suffering as feeding and the way that his suffering leads to an appearance of Christ, calls on these connections: 'to feed others was to offer one's own suffering as food'.⁵⁷¹

The physical location of the beetle's suckling, at the woman's side, recalls breastfeeding. The image used is very negative, though. *Cloïd* renders the notion of consumption in its most destructive form. When Buchet complains about the excessive consumption of his foster daughter's brothers in *Esnada Tige Buchet* he says: 'Macne Chathair ro chloíset mo brugas búar' 'The sons of Cathair have used up all my hospitality and cattle'.⁵⁷² Even more striking is the statement about Bricriu to be found in the genealogies of Rawlinson B 502. It is said that 'dí cích mná no chlóitis leis' 'two breasts of a woman would be destroyed by him'.⁵⁷³ The negative verb again highlights Íte's noble suffering but it does so in a way that recalls the nutritive aspect of fosterage. Coupled with the negative associations inherent in the beetle, it dramatically foreshadows the eventual reward. The foreshadowing of the fostering finds its

⁵⁶⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the Middle* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 123; *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 272.

⁵⁷⁰ PL 189:1726; Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians* (San Francisco, 2000), p. 152. For a further discussion of Arnold's work see Rachel Fulton, *From Judgement to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York, 2002) pp. 425-27.

⁵⁷¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 250.

⁵⁷² *Fingal Rónáin*, ed. Greene, p. 28.

⁵⁷³ *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*, ed. M. A. O'Brien (Dublin, 1962), p. 284.

culmination in the divine reward, which is to foster Christ. The avatar of death is replaced with the son of life.

The reward is recompense for Íte's grief over her fosterling. The negative fosterage of the beetle is met with the positive fosterage of Christ. The prose introduction prompts the reader of the poem to see the fosterage metaphor at work for the poetic voice encountering the Christ Child through fosterage. It is telling that the poet draws on the emotional network of fosterage for the imagery. Taking the poem and its prose introduction together we see that when writers wish to imply a relationship of affection and devotion, fosterage is the preferred way to represent it. Such affection comes from the relationship itself, not just from the positive actions of those involved in it. Íte cares for the beetle even though it is destroying her side. Fosterage is the best lens through which to understand the complex nexus of feeding, suffering, and affection that forms Íte's relationship with the Christ Child.

4.3. The Christ Child Elsewhere in Middle Irish

The evidence presented in the previous section is striking but if it stands alone, it would not be much to base firm conclusions on. In this section I will address other examples of visitations by the Christ Child to Irish religious. In some cases, fosterage imagery is used to highlight the affective bond between Christ Child and saint. In others, where fosterage terminology is absent, there is still an affective bond created between adult and child. These examples are called upon, in the main, to give greater context to the clear fosterage element in *Ísucán* and its prose introduction. It is noteworthy that Christ appears as a child at all in these episodes from the Life of Moling, the Life of Adomnán, and further notes to *Félire Óengusso*. Taken together with *Ísucán* and its introduction, a picture emerges of fosterage as a means to demonstrate a close emotional bond with the divine. In these texts the focus is on the relationship, on the saint as fosterer and their affective bond with the Christ Child, rather than on the characterisation of Christ as a child.

It is tempting to view the fosterage bonds created in these visions and in *Ísucán* as excessively feminine. It is true that in the later Middle Ages there appears to be a close female association between sanctity and images of childbirth and child-rearing. However, in the Irish context we can see a parity between the sexes in expressing affection to the Christ Child in this way. At this point I would diverge from Bynum's statement that 'men were more likely to use the image of being nursed; women metaphors of nursing'.⁵⁷⁴ Apart from Íte there is only one other female example, that of Eithne and Sodelb.⁵⁷⁵ For men the image occurs for Moling and Adomnán, with a related episode occurring in the Life of Colmán Ela. That such imagery is equally open to both sexes demonstrates that the metaphor at work in these examples is fosterage, rather than motherhood. What is being represented is the close affection felt by foster-parents for their fosterlings. This affection was bodily expressed but was not gendered, allowing everyone direct contact with the Christ Child.

We begin with the example found in The Life of Moling. The focus will be on the Middle Irish life, although there is a Latin life which includes a similar episode. Moling is not eaten by a beetle in order to summon the Christ Child. Rather, he is the consumer in an encounter with a leper. Chapter twelve of the life describes Moling journeying through Ireland. A leper comes out of the woods and begs to be carried to a nearby church. Moling takes the leper on his bare back, in case the roughness of his clothes would strip the leper's skin. The leper then asks that the saint blow his nose. However, he turns down the offer of a hand to wipe it on, fearing that the roughness would remove his nose. So the saint has to suck the mucus out: 'Dobeir in clérech a bél immo sróin ocus súighis cuce hí, ocus cuiridh ina dorn clé in saele sin' 'The cleric placed his lips around his nose and sucked it towards him. He put the mucus in his left hand'.⁵⁷⁶ Once this is done the leper disappears:

⁵⁷⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 270.

⁵⁷⁵ FO, p. 102; *The Martyrology of Tallaght*, ed. and trans. Richard Irvine Best and H. J. Lawlor (London, 1931), p. 28.

⁵⁷⁶ *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, p. 30.

"Ní choidél-sa ocus ní caithiub biadh co tora mo Tigerna co follas fiadnach cucum". Ro bhói iarumh isin inad sin co medón aidche. Táinic in t-aingel cuce. Asbert fris: "Cinnas badh ferr let do Tigerna do tidhacht dot accallaim?" "I richt meic sheacht mblíadan", ar sé, "co ndénaínd ella báide imme". Ní ro rathaigsiumh i cind ré iartain co ro suidhestair Críst ina ucht i rricht maccaimh vii mblíadan, co raibhi ic báidhe imme co tráth éirge arnabárach.⁵⁷⁷

"I will neither sleep nor eat until my Lord comes to me clearly and evidently". He stayed in that place until midnight. Then the angel came to him and said "How do you want the Lord come to you to speak with you?" "In the form of a boy of seven years", he said, "so that I may show my sweet fondness for him". For a while he did not notice anything, until Christ sat on his lap in the form of a youth of seven years. He was displaying his fondness for him until the hour of rising on the next day.

There are number of similarities between this narrative and the Íte one, even if the fosterage element is not made as explicit here. The idea of suffering and reward are drawn out by the outcry Moling makes after the leper disappears. As the Lord has tricked the saint, the saint demands just recompense. He does so by fasting against God, a common practice in Irish hagiography most famously employed by Patrick.⁵⁷⁸ Again, as in the Íte tale, in which she too fasts against God, the suffering and reward mirror one another in their imagery of affection and quasi-feeding.

However, there is no explicit reference to fosterage in this depiction of Jesus and Moling's relationship. The text does present us with an affective relationship of a kind we have already seen. This miracle and Íte's are of a type. The affective nature of Moling's interaction with the Christ Child has been noted before by Eichhorn-Mulligan: 'The relationship between Christ and Moling is depicted as an intimate physical relationship possibly suggestive of the bond between mother and child'.⁵⁷⁹ I agree that close affection is being suggested, but given the gender of and biological connection between the two protagonists, fosterage would provide a more fitting model than mother and child. Affection arising from close bodily connection is a

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid, pp. 30, 32.

⁵⁷⁸ *The Tripartite Life of Patrick: with other documents relating to that saint*, ed. by Whitley Stokes, 2 vols (London, 1887), II, pp. 112-19. See Binchy's article on *troscad* in D. A. Binchy, 'A Pre-Christian Survival in Medieval Irish Hagiography' in *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. by D. Whitelock, R. McKitterick and D. Dumville (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 165-78.

⁵⁷⁹ Amy Eichhorn-Mulligan, 'The Anatomy of Power and the Miracle of Kingship: The Female Body of Sovereignty in a Medieval Irish Kingship Tale', *Speculum* 81 (2006), 1014-1054: p. 1049.

central facet of fosterage and it is introduced to the miracle in the way Moling sucks mucus from the leper's nose.

Sucking mucus from the leper's nose seems unusual but the image partakes of a long tradition of kissing the leper. There is even another Irish example found in the Life of Féchín of Fore. In this example, it is not the saint but the wife of Diarmair mac Aoda Slaine who sucks the mucus from the leper's nose. Once again the leper is Jesus in disguise but there is no appearance of the Christ Child. Indeed, I would suggest that the sucking imagery in this life is more sexual forming part of the characterisation of lepers as overly lascivious: 'He required a well-born woman to sleep with him, and he was wanton (*og macnus*) to Féchín as is the manner of lepers'.⁵⁸⁰ Beyond Ireland kissing a leper is famously included in the list of healing miracles performed by St Martin in Sulpicius Severus' *Vita*.⁵⁸¹ The image then occurs in other saints' lives, especially from the twelfth and thirteenth century, inspiring lay and religious devotions.⁵⁸² In all other examples the symbol of intimacy remains a kiss or an embrace. The intimacy expressed in these miracles is that between two adults with no more at stake than physical contact. Moling has gone beyond merely kissing and sucks the mucus out of the nose of the leper. I have only found one similar episode, that in the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Caesarius of Heisterbach. The *Dialogus* was compiled in the thirteenth century, so may post-date the life of Moling. In this version a nameless bishop is approached by a leper who asks for a piece of flesh hanging from his nose to be removed 'magni horroris atque foetoris'. Nothing will do to remove it except for the tongue of the bishop: 'nihil aliud patiar praeter linctionem linguae tuae'.⁵⁸³

While there are parallels between the two episodes, in comparing them we can see that Moling's interaction with the leper suggests something different to the reader.

⁵⁸⁰ Whitley Stokes, 'Life of Féchín of Fore', *RC* 12 (1891), 318-53: pp. 342-43.

⁵⁸¹ *Sulpice Sévère, Vie de Saint Martin*, ed. and trans. by Jacques Fontaine, 3 vols. (Paris, 1967-69) I, p. 292.

⁵⁸² Catherine Peyroux, 'The Leper's Kiss' in *Monks and Nuns, Saints and Outcasts: Religion in Medieval Society* ed. by Sharon Farmer and Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca, 2000), pp. 172-88; Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 144.

⁵⁸³ *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Monachi Ordinis Cisterciensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange, 2 vols (Cologne, 1851), II: p. 106.

In Caesarius' version we are supposed to revile the hideous leper, in which context the bishop's actions are more admirable as he overcomes his revulsion and debases himself for the lowly leper. To further this reading, the leper's stench is emphasised and the dialogue highlights the physical touch of the tongue to the diseased flesh. In the case of Moling there is no concentration on the leper's form but the focus is on how Moling obeys his increasingly onerous commands, which culminate in sucking the mucus from the leper's nose.⁵⁸⁴ Sucking the mucus from the leper's nose brings the saint into close bodily contact, a repulsive foreshadowing of the bodily affection shown to the Christ Child.

When the child eventually appears to Moling, the affection he shows is again redolent of the fosterage bond, even if the link is not made in that direct language. Moling asks for the child so that he may 'show him sweet affection (*ella báide*)', a phrase that is repeated once the child has appeared. It is interesting that the child appears as a seven-year-old child. This is not the young child of the Íte miracle, a fact reinforced with use of the word *maccaim*. Seven is the age at which most monastic fosterage begins and so having the child appear in this form would be the most suitable for Moling. What we can see in this miracle is the creation of a close affectionate bond between saint and child. It does not use fosterage language as directly as Íte's miracle and the brief duration of the visit contrasts with the long-lasting ties created through fosterage. Moling's interactions still draw on similar images and tropes to Íte's miracle.

The other male saint who appears to foster the Christ Child is Adomnán of Iona. The episode appears in two different contexts: the Irish *Betha Adamnáin* and in the notes to the Martyrology of Donegal. It would appear that the episode in the Martyrology was copied from that in the Life.⁵⁸⁵ The Life was written in Middle Irish

⁵⁸⁴ This may mirror instances of sucking as a demonstration of obedience found elsewhere in medieval Irish literature: Daniel A. Binchy, 'The saga of Fergus mac Léti', *Ériu* 16 (1952), 33-48: p. 41; *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii*, ed. Bieler, p. 67; Bernhard Maier, 'Sugere Mamellas: A Pagan Irish Custom and its Affinities', in *Celtic Connections: Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Celtic Studies*, ed. by Ronald Black and others, (East Linton, 1999), pp. 152-61.

⁵⁸⁵ *Betha Adamnáin: The Irish Life of Adomnán*, ed. and trans. Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (Cork, 1988), p. 83.

and survives in a single manuscript.⁵⁸⁶ According to the most recent editors of the text its composition can be dated to sometime between 956x964.⁵⁸⁷ The episode is as follows:

Fecht ele do Adhamnán i n(h)Í trí lá agus teora oidhchi i n(d)-óeine ina thigh fhordúnta cen toidecht 'na mainistir. Luidh huathadh forbthi don ticch dús cionnus ro boí an cléirech. Ro déchsat for toll na heochrach co n(f)acatar in mac mbecc roálainn i n(d)-ucht Adamnáin. Ro buí dna Adamnán occ búidhe frisín náeidhin co mbo derbh leo be hé Ísu do-luidh i ndeillb náeidin do airphetiud Adamnáin.

At another time when Adomnán was in Iona, he fasted in his closed house for three days and nights and did not come to the monastery. A few of the faithful went to the house to see how the cleric was. They looked through the keyhole and saw a very beautiful little boy in Adomnán's lap. Adomnán was showing affection to the infant in a manner which convinced them that it was Jesus who had come in the form of a child in order to bring solace to Adomnán.⁵⁸⁸

Herbert and Ó Riain have pointed out the similarities between this episode and the one Adomnán himself wrote in his *Vita Sancti Columbae*. However, in this latter example it is the Holy Spirit who comes to visit Columba after three days of secluded fasting. The 'grace of the Holy Ghost' instructs Columba about mysteries of scripture – a miracle we have seen at work in chapter three.⁵⁸⁹ In the example I wish to discuss, written three hundred years after the account of Columba's miracle, the focus has shifted from holy knowledge to holy consolation. The fasting leads to the appearance of the Christ Child and the language describing Adomnán's interaction with the child is like that used of Moling and his affectionate relationship: he caresses the child (*occ búidhe frisín*). Furthermore, the child is placed in a physical relationship with the saint most redolent of fosterage and affection, on the breast or lap, *ucht*.

I have commented on the paradox inherent in the figure of the Christ Child and here we see further evidence in the role reversal. Jesus has come in the form of a child but he is there to 'bring solace (*do airphetiud*) to Adomnán', where the verb has the

⁵⁸⁶ Brussels Bibliothèque Royale, 4190-200.

⁵⁸⁷ *Betha Adamnáin*, ed. Herbert and Ó Riain, p. 8.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 58-9.

⁵⁸⁹ *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. by Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, (London, 1961), pp. 502-05.

sense of 'assume responsibility for'.⁵⁹⁰ The child has come to take responsibility for the adult, something that was expected of fosterlings in the old age of their foster-parents. This is similar to the role the Christ Child plays in the other example of female saints being visited. In *Félire Óengusso* and the *Martyrology of Tallaght* the notes accompanying the feast day of sisters Eithne and Sodelb on 29 March, include a brief tale about the Christ Child. The narrative is very short. What follows is the note found in the Rawlinson B.505 version of the *Félire*:

Ethne 7 Sodelb nomina earum 7 ticed Críst ir-richt noeden co mbid in sinu earum et osculabantur eum, et ille baptizavit eas et si apostoli praedicaverint illis tamen plus ab ipso acceperunt fidem quam ab illis.⁵⁹¹

Ethne and Sodelb are their names and Christ used to come to them in the shape of a baby so that he was on their laps and they kissed him. He baptised them and if the apostles had preached to them, they would have taken more faith from the babe than them.

The Christ Child appears to the women for no reason. In the Rawlinson version the narrative is most comprehensive and this includes the affective image of kissing the child. In the *Martyrology of Tallaght* they are briefly described as 'fostering (*nutriebant*) Christ'.⁵⁹² In Rawlinson's fuller account the power relationship is again reversed and Christ baptises the saints and is responsible for their holy education. We have seen how angels have marked the holy education of other saints. Once more, we see fosterage used to describe saints' relationship with the Christ Child.

Although the Christ Child is active in the last two examples studied, there is still a striking lack of characterisation. Rather it is the fosterage or foster-like relationship that exists between saint and child that is the focus. In the last case, the appearance of the Christ Child is used to confirm Eithne and Sodelb's sanctity. The small detail gives them a sanctity to justify their inclusion in the martyrologies, the purpose of the miracle to glorify the two women. In the life of Adomnán, the Christ Child appears in the same narrative role the Holy Ghost had in Columba's encounter

⁵⁹⁰ eDIL s.v. airfeithem.

⁵⁹¹ FO, p. 102.

⁵⁹² *The Martyrology of Tallaght*, p. 28.

with the divine. Both miracles further the sanctity of their subject, but whereas Columba receives insight from the Spirit, Adomnán receives solace from a child. The bond with the Christ Child is the most fitting way to express an affective relationship to the divine, characterised by Adomnán's seeking solace. Moling takes against being tricked and demands recompense from God: the presence of the child. *Ísucán* takes the infant Jesus as its central theme but elaborates on the relationship between the speaker and the child, not on the characteristics of the child himself. This is markedly different from the presentation of Jesus found in the Middle Irish poem on the Christ Child and other literature which describe him.⁵⁹³ In these tales it is the relationship that is emphasised.

Although fosterage terminology is only used in connection with Íte, Eithne, and Sodelb, all of these stories represent an affective connection with the Christ Child. There are similarities to the language and tropes that surround fosterage, that I have demonstrated make Adomnán and Moling's experience foster-like. When creating ways for the saints to interact with God, there is an image of the young child taken in by the religious, on which to draw. Not only does this create an affective connection between Christ and his representative in the earthly realm but it allows for a play on the power relationships so embodied. The saint has a duty of care towards and a power over the young boy but the young boy, as Lord of creation, has a duty of care towards and power over the mortal. Such play with power could have its basis in the tendency to foster down the social scale.⁵⁹⁴ Whatever the reason we are left with an image of saints relating to the divine through the figure of the child in the monastery. The equal gender divide and the advanced age of the child, in some examples, move these image away from the notion of holy pregnancy. Rather, when an affectionate bond was to be created medieval Irish writers called on the image of fosterage. I posit fosterage as the reason for the early appearance of this miracle in Irish sources. Furthermore, the texts show that fosterage could be employed outside formal fosterage relationships, to

⁵⁹³ *The Poems of Blathmac*, ed. Carney, pp. 89-105.

⁵⁹⁴ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 90.

describe close affective bonds. The assumptions behind the writing point to an emotionally fulfilling connection, framed in fosterage language.

4.4. Miraculous Fosterage in the Saints' Lives

If the writers of miracles refer to fosterage in creating an emotional bond between the saint and Christ, they could base this emotional bond on fosterage within their own monasteries. In *Ísucán* the sons of nobility and clerics are compared unfavourably with fostering the Christ Child, which would seem to suggest that in the normal run of events religious like Íte were expected to take in fosterlings. In this section I will look at some examples of monastic fosterage in hagiography. In particular, I will focus on three examples of fosterage in the monastery in which a male miraculously lactates. I will analyse these texts to show how fosterage in the monastery interacted with models of oblation and secular fosterage. The miracles of lactating male saints have something to tell us about the problems nutritive fosterage presented to a monastic community. The tension felt around having a male saint take on this female role is clear in our sources. Yet there are numerous saints' lives in which a less drastic answer to feeding young children was found. Through these miracles, we will see how fosterage provided a model for the emotional community created in the monastery.

Returning to Íte, briefly, her role as foster-mother is not confined to her characterisation in connection to *Ísucán*. Indeed, Íte is known as the 'foster-mother of the saints of Ireland' in the life of Brendan, and other medieval religious writers cast her in this role, even though it is not one she has in her own life.⁵⁹⁵ She appears in the life of Máedóg to ask him to raise a dead foster-daughter of hers.⁵⁹⁶ Her most famous foster role is in the life of Brendan as his constant spiritual advisor. In one version of Brendan's famous voyages, it is only with her help that he manages to reach the Isles

⁵⁹⁵ VSH, I, p. 99: 'Hec enim virgo multos sanctorum Hibernie ab infantia nutrit'; VSH, II, pp. 116-130; Elva Johnston, 'Íte: Patron of her people?', *Peritia* 14 (2000), 421-28.

⁵⁹⁶ BNE, I, p. 238.

of Promise: 'He went after that to the place where his foster-mother (*a buime*), Ita, was ... she said to him: "Oh dearly beloved son (*a mheic ionmhain*), why did you go on this journey without taking my advice?'"'.⁵⁹⁷ However, in a Latin life she appears to give him the contradictory advice that he should never learn from or associate with women, even though he profits greatly from his learning and association with her.⁵⁹⁸ She enacts the long-lasting connection between foster-mother and fosterling founded on the care she gives to him.

The focus of this section will be on the Lives of Findchú of Brigown, Colmán Ela and Berach, which all have episodes of children taken from their mothers at a young age and reared by men. The lives of Findchú and Colmán are written in Middle Irish, whereas it is the Latin life of Berach that makes reference to this miraculous suckling. Yet these lives are not linked and the miracles are not based on one another. In fact, they diverge in fascinating ways. These Lives have been discussed before by Bray, but she concentrates on the educational aspect of the miracles which she places in a wider Eucharistic context: 'the significance of such breast-feeding in the examples from Irish hagiography can be expressed on the same level: the milk from the breasts (or ear) of the holy men is the sustenance of the Word of God (and His wisdom), which is also symbolised by the blood of Christ in the Eucharist'.⁵⁹⁹ The educational aspect of the miracles does have some bearing on the fosterage presented. The children are receiving their monastic education and instruction in psalms and letters alongside their miraculous feeding. Yet there are social, emotional bonds formed at the same time.

The fosterage described in these tales seems similar to those examples we have seen before. In two cases the nursing man is a blood relation to the child he has adopted, related in the maternal line as examined in chapter one. Finally, the fosterage is a response to the troubles that the births engender. The examples used here conform with the view of fosterage as a tool for social ordering, useful for combating the jealousy

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 64.

⁵⁹⁸ VSH, I, p. 102.

⁵⁹⁹ Dorothy Ann Bray, 'Suckling at the Breast of Christ: A Spiritual Lesson in an Irish Hagiographical Motif', *Peritia* 14 (2000), 282-296: p. 289.

of multiple wives and covering the sins of incestuous conceptions.⁶⁰⁰ The fosterages of the Mac Óc and Máel Dúin are examples of how the practice was used to avoid social tensions. Most importantly the feeding by the holy man recalls the intimate, wet-nursing aspect of fosterage. The emotional bond is embodied, for the woman, by the breast at which they feed the child. For the foster-father embodiment can come through the physical education passed on to the fosterling. In these miracles, the saint attempts to take on all roles within the foster-family.⁶⁰¹

Such concerns over gender are heightened within the masculine community of the monastery. This community is not single-sex but it is one in which separation of the sexes is a primary concern, if not an obtainable reality. Oblation, the dedicating of children to life-long service to God, has been read as a means of social ordering, allowing monasteries to grow and parents to divest themselves of unwanted children.⁶⁰² What we see in the Irish saints' lives is not the irrevocable sacrifice to God, but a relationship more closely modelled on fosterage. The men in these miracles try to take on all fosterage roles including the female biological role. Yet the saints actually engage with femininity in a very antagonistic manner, at once highlighting the inherent problems thought to exist within women and demonstrating the superiority of the (male) saints' masculinity. The saints miraculously combine the roles of foster-father and foster-mother. They encode a physical closeness with the emotionally close bond of fosterage.

The picture that emerges is one in which masculinity is central. The men do not take on, in their lactation, the associated female gender role. The miracles create an entirely male family unit while excising the weakness and pollution that supposedly comes from the body of women. These miraculous, masculine lactations not only bolster the assumption of male superiority but they add to the all-male propaganda surrounding the monastic life. The way fosterage creates new families, not related by

⁶⁰⁰ Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 94, 103.

⁶⁰¹ The fosterer roles adopted by these saints represent different ways of embodying abbatial power, which interact with Bynum's views on abbot as mother (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 118).

⁶⁰² Boswell, *Kindness of Strangers*, p. 238-39.

blood, is used to create a foster-family composed entirely of men. The young charges are taken in soon after birth, are suckled at the breast of a man, and then are entered into the monastic life. These saints' lives suggest that the medieval Irish were able to distinguish sex and gender, for in order to uphold the superiority of their sex these holy men perform an act marked for the female sex. The medieval Irish can escape from biological necessity and the medieval Irish church uses this to reinforce its image of a unified monastic family. Once more Bynum's insight into Cistercian piety is useful for this discussion.⁶⁰³

I shall begin this investigation with Findchú whose Middle Irish life is preserved in the Book of Lismore, the famous fifteenth-century manuscript, and a seventeenth-century Brussels manuscript.⁶⁰⁴ The episode in which Findchú breast feeds comes in the first half of the life. Nuada the king of Leinster has two wives, and when one, Aífe, falls pregnant the other becomes jealous. In order to save the unborn child Nuada sends his pregnant wife to Findchú for sanctuary. She sets off for Brigown from Leinster with a small retinue; her chariot breaks and she goes to seek shelter. While there she starts to give birth. Findchú, performing his ascetic rites in a cold bath, miraculously has foreknowledge of this event and sends her a message:

'Et asberar uadha fria gan techta asan inadh a raibhe co rucadh a toirrches, áir ní ghnáthaighdis mna náit bandala techt ar eclais Finnchua intansin. Beridh ingen mac mochtrath aramárach 7 berar uaithi he dia bhaisdid co Finnchua. Baisdter iarsin an mac 7 doberar "Findtan" fair ... Oilter in mac oc Finnchua, 7 dobeir a chích des dó, cu rofhas bainne innti, 7 fogarthar damhrad im theacht 'na tír fein. Dobhí bisech ar an mac sin nách bíadh oca mháthair fesin dia mbeitis noenbur banaltrann fai.'⁶⁰⁵

'And he sends a message to her not to come out of the place in which she was till she had given birth to her child, for at that time neither women nor ladies used to come to Findchú's church. The girl gives birth to a boy early the next day and he is taken from her to Findchua to be baptized. Thereafter the boy is baptized and [the name] Finntan is given to him ... The boy is reared by Findchú, who gives him his right breast and milk grew therein. Meanwhile his mother is warned to go back to her own country. That boy throve as he would not have otherwise with his own mother even if he had had nine wet-nurses under him'.

⁶⁰³ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, p. 122.

⁶⁰⁴ Brussels Bibliothèque Royale, 2324-2340, ff. 35-43

⁶⁰⁵ *Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, p.90.

Finntan grows to be a well-educated monk who sets off to make his own foundation at Clonenagh. There is a life of Finntan surviving, written in Latin in the ninth century, one of the so called O'Donohue Lives.⁶⁰⁶ The beginning to this life does not include any mention of Findchú and so we cannot attribute their association to an earlier tradition. Rather, as in the Christ Child examples above, the fosterling is not the focus of the action but the fact that Findchú works a miracle and can maintain his family or community without women.

The breast-feeding miracle draws Findchú into the role of fosterer and does so at the interplay between masculinity and femininity. Although striking, the physiology of the episode seems remarkably straightforward. The male breast takes on the role of the female breast; the right hand one since it is the more propitious side of the body and is thought to be the best side from which to feed a child.⁶⁰⁷ The parallel between his action and that of a foster-mother is made clear when the efficacy of the feeding is remarked upon. The child is growing up better than if he had had nine wet-nurses, (*banaltrann*). Wet-nurse is the translation that Stokes uses but it could equally be translated as 'foster-mother'. While the *altram* element has been examined before, it is prefaced by *ban*, the preface indicating a female practitioner, as in *banécis* 'female poet'.⁶⁰⁸ The female prefix, almost unnecessary given the context, highlights the sex differences at work, valorising Findchú's masculinity. Findchú is the fosterer par excellence, as not only does he educate and care for the boy, but he can feed him with his miraculous breast.

Findchú is explicitly said to provide better food and succour than nine women. The praise of the masculine is also expressed in the birth mother's quick and summary

⁶⁰⁶ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saint's Lives*, p. 329; for a criticism of the date of the O'Donohue Lives see Pádraig Ó Riain, 'The O'Donohue Lives of the Salamanca Code: The earliest collection of Irish saints' lives?' in *Gablánach in Scélaigeacht: Celtic Studies in Honour of Ann Dooley*, ed. S. Sheehan, et al. (Dublin, 2013), pp. 38-52; Caoimhín Breatnach, 'The Significance of the Orthography of Irish Proper Names in the Codex Salmanticensis', *Ériu* 55 (2005), 85-101: p. 101; John Carey, 'Review of Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*' *Speculum* 68 (1993), 260-62: p. 262.

⁶⁰⁷ For example, William of Conches' views examined in MacLehose, *A Tender Age: Cultural Anxieties over the Child in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Columbia, 2008), pp. 10, 41.

⁶⁰⁸ eDIL, s.v. 1 ben.

removal. Although she must be present, the author is quick to place Finntan in an all-male setting. Aífe is removed from the narrative after the boy is taken to Findchú in his church where women are not allowed to tread. The prescription physically illustrates the hierarchy of masculine and feminine and plays on the idea of sanctuary and the physical separation of religious and secular spheres. The tight prescription of Findchú, that no women should set foot in his church, is unusually excessive but is still tied to a notion about the polluting presence of women. Though a reader may think that Aífe is sent away from Leinster for her own protection, this not the case, as she cannot enter the enclosure. It is the unborn child who is the focus of concern and as soon as he is born he is taken from his mother and away from all women. The role of nurturer is miraculously taken on by the male saint in this new family.

Throughout, Findchú has the active role, as the saints in the Christ Child miracles do. He commanded Aífe to remain outside and on his orders the child was brought from his mother to the saint in his church. The pains Findchú was suffering when he received a premonition of the birth are his voluntary, manly, ascetic practices. He is suffering at the same time Aífe is giving birth, contrasting his act with the divine punishment meted out on women as a result of the Fall. For this saint, the miraculous breast-feeding is the culmination of an act of appropriation of the child-raising process. This is not the adoption of a female role in order to humble the saint. Rather this bellicose saint, as at home on the battlefield as in the cloister, demonstrates man's supposed superiority to woman; even in those acts which are usually the sole preserve of women. As the Life continues, although the boy Finntan and his biological father return to the narrative, Aífe, his mother, does not.

Findchú fosters to expand his family and community. He miraculously takes on the nutritive role, as well as performing the educative one. It is not just Findchú's actions that are redolent of fosterage, but the wider context of the narrative. One of the reasons given for the existence of the fosterage system has been to prevent conflict

that would arise between different wives and their different offspring.⁶⁰⁹ In this text the primary motivation for sending Aífe off to Findchú is the jealousy of the king's other wife. Anmet is dearer to the king (*annsa lasin rígh*) than Finntan's mother and asks for power over her rival's child.⁶¹⁰

Although expressed in a laconic fashion, it is assumed that the power of Anmet over her rival's offspring would not have turned out well. The seemingly odd preference of the king for Anmet, when he fathers a child on Aífe is explained if we view his preference as marking Anmet out as his *cétmuinter*, or 'primary wife'. The jealousy of the *cétmuinter* for a lower born concubine and their offspring is a classic trope.⁶¹¹ This trope is illustrated in the Life of Berach, when the saint miraculously intervenes to protect a child from its step-mother's wrath by turning her to stone. Not only is this an example of evil harboured in the step-mother's heart, but it includes a reference to the child being fostered by Cóemgen: 'filius regis Laginie, qui cum sancto Caimino a pueritia fuit nutritus...'.⁶¹² In the narrative the child is young, but it is not made clear how Cóemgen was feeding him. The saint was certainly in charge of his education, possibly motivated by similar concerns to those seen in Findchú's life. The success of this kind of fosterage is predicated on the distance between the natal family and the place of foster-family, something we can see in Aífe's journey from Leinster to Cork.

Furthermore, the close emotional bond created by fosterage is used in a rather mercenary fashion in Findchú's Life. After the boy has been placed in the saint's care the conflict between Nuadu and his first wife's family, the Uí Chennselaig, takes a turn

⁶⁰⁹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 94-5; The actuality of polygyny in medieval Ireland has recently been conclusively challenged by Liam Breatnach alongside the common translation of 'chief wife' (Liam Breatnach, 'On Old Irish Collective and Abstract Nouns, The Meaning of *Cétmuinter*, and Marriage in Early Mediaeval Ireland', *Ériu* 66 (2016), pp. 1-29).

⁶¹⁰ *Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, p. 90.

⁶¹¹ Its most famous iteration is the conflict between Cairenn and Mongfind in *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* (Stokes, 'Death of Crimthann', pp. 190-193), as well Fuamnach's jealousy of Étaín in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 152). The trope of competing wives is also seen in *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca* (*Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca*, ed. Lil Ní Dhonnchadha (Dublin, 1964), p.2).

⁶¹² VSH, I, p. 78

for the worse. The king's reaction is to call on the saint: 'There is a valiant warrior beyond Sliab Cua, that is Findchú of Brigown. He has my son with him and because of his fondness (*tre bháidh*) he will come to my host, since I am dear (*am inmhain*) in his eyes due to my son'.⁶¹³ Findchú ends up cursing the opposing host and victory goes the way of the Leinstermen. Nuadu's response, to lean on Findchú through the affection the saint has for his son, is a clear example of the supposed political benefits of fosterage highlighted in secondary literature.⁶¹⁴ The fact that the child is instrumental in this exchange is evinced in Finntan's accompanying Findchú on his military expedition.

The example of Findchú introduced us to the notion of combining nutritive and educative fosterage in one body. In the second example, the educational aspect is emphasised, although the miraculous breastfeeding is still the central image to this fosterage. The miracles of Colmán Ela are recorded in what cannot be described as a *vita* in the traditional sense. It is more a collection of miracles the saint performed as an adult, written in Middle Irish. In this episode he is prompted to miraculously lactate to solve a problem posed to him by his uncle, Colum Cille. Colum Cille's sister (and therefore Colmán's aunt) has given birth to twins and, because they have been born of an incestuous union, Colum Cille wants to kill them. This wish obviously poses problems for the saint who founded Iona. Colmán manages to solve the problem with this advice: 'Give them to me to nourish and foster (*da naltrom 7 a da noilemain iatt*). And let us make a covenant respecting them for I have two breasts (*da cích*) such as no saint ever had before, a breast with milk, and a breast with honey,⁶¹⁵ and these I will give to them'.⁶¹⁶ He thereafter takes the boys and recites a poem about his miraculous ability.

Familial relationships are central to this episode and its presentation of fosterage. It is Colum Cille's relationship to Colmán that prompts him to seek his help

⁶¹³ *Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, p. 90.

⁶¹⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 79.

⁶¹⁵ The non-biological provision of milk and honey is consonant with twelfth-century religious nursing imagery, Bynum, *Holy Feast*, p. 271.

⁶¹⁶ BNE, I, p. 174.

and Colmán takes in his cousins because of his connection to them. Colmán is related to the boys through the maternal branch and the maternal line's interest in fosterage has been noted before. The familial background leads us to expect a foster relationship, which is signalled by the synonymous fosterage verbs *altrom* and *oilemain*. This monastic fosterage is the one that has most in common with secular fosterage. But attention needs to be paid to the monastic space the boys are taken into and how their connection to the polluting circumstances of their birth is severed.

The major difference is the irreversible nature of this fosterage, something that draws the children's position closer to oblation. There are other examples of fosterage being used as a response to sexual impropriety. In the later version of the expulsion of the Déssi, compiled sometime before 1106 in the estimation of Hull, Corc Duibne is placed in fosterage for the same reason.⁶¹⁷ He is born of incest, one of two twins – although the other does not figure outside the tale of Corc's birth – and he is taken out of Ireland 'so that the disgrace may not be there'.⁶¹⁸ Corc only returns to Ireland after his foster-mother washes the stain of his parents' sin away. In the same way Colmán takes the boys out of the world and into the monastery. The fosterage is introduced as an alternative to death and the boys are never given the option to return to the secular world. The new family, created by fosterage, is much more important than the old blood family, in this case with good reason, given the circumstances of the boys' birth. The way the boys are permanently removed from their family, has similarities to oblation, which I will discuss later.

The educational nature of the relationship between Colmán and his young charges is made clear in his subsequent interactions with them. After the long poem about the boys and the Fir Cell, we are told of the boys' fate: 'acc denamh a leighinn i lloind Eala' 'they were studying in Lann Eala'.⁶¹⁹ Lann Eala is Colmán's foundation, after which he gets his nickname, and it is later made clear that they are studying with Colmán, since he strikes one of the boys for being foolish. In fact, the rest of the tale is

⁶¹⁷ Hull, 'Expulsion of the Déssi', pp. 15, 52.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid, p. 53.

⁶¹⁹ BNE, I, p. 178.

given over, in some way, to education and the boys are central characters in it. There is also a sense in which the miraculous milk the boys are imbibing is shaping their characters. For, just as the child takes on the characteristics of the woman who suckles it, be they mother or wet-nurse, so too the two boys are said to have miraculous powers. It is never explicitly stated that these special abilities come from Colmán, but the juxtaposition of the episodes suggests a link.⁶²⁰ The image ties together the notions of nutritive and educative fosterage.

The final saint I wish to discuss in this light is Berach. Sharpe has dated his Latin life to the thirteenth century, although it only survives in one manuscript so the dating is tentative.⁶²¹ There is also a vernacular life of Berach which does not include a miraculous feeding; in this life Berach is fostered by Fráech until he is old enough to study.⁶²² In contrast with the two preceding saints, Berach is the one who is suckled, by his uncle Fráech, rather than the one who does the feeding. Fráech is also not tied to a monastery but is called *cruimther* in the Irish and *sanctus* in the Latin. The saint is not placed in a difficult physiological position and still he is marked out by the unusual nature of his early life, a common feature for many saints. This miracle conforms to some of the tropes of fosterage I have noted above and seems to move away from the more female aspects of fosterage. The physiology is different, as Fráech feeds the young Berach from his ear rather than miraculous breast. The conflict between male, religious fostering and the female family is made explicit.

The *Vita sancti Berachi* begins with a prophecy from Patrick about a miraculous birth in the region of Connacht. The parents of Berach are two faithful Christians living in a land of pagan idolatry. Finnsrad's brother is the holy man, Fráech. On the night of Berach's birth, Fráech sees a great ball of fire over his sister's house and so sends a messenger to see if his sister has given birth to a boy, the child of prophecy. The boy is soon brought to Fráech to be baptized:

⁶²⁰ Honey was often used in Jewish learning practice, see Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Culture and Acculturation in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, 1998), pp. 18-25.

⁶²¹ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, pp. 265-66, 371. The manuscript is Bodleian, Rawlinson B 408.

⁶²² BNE, I, p. 26.

Infantem in Christo regeneratum mater secum conabatur detinere, ut silicet lacte proprio tenerius aleretur, quam cum nutrice alia alieno. Set sanctus vir Dei hoc non permisit, dicens: "Scias, soror mea karissima, quod huius pueri sollicitudinem amplius non subportabis. Mecum enim in Christi nomine remanebit. Potens est enim Deus, qui ipsum creavit, ut ad perfectum proveniat incrementum membrorum absque ministerio lactis mulierum". Quod et rei probavit eventus. Nam cum a viro Dei diligenti cura educaretur, solitus erat, ut matris mamillam, sancti Fregii auriculam sugere dextram. Sicque factum est nutu illius, qui mel de petra potens est producere, ut contactu auricule viri Dei puer cresceret, tanquam omnem lactis materni exuberantiam haberet.⁶²³

As the child was being reborn in Christ his mother tried to keep him with her, as it is right that he be raised with more tenderness on her own milk than with that of some other foreign wet-nurse. But the holy man of God did not allow this and said: "My dearest sister, you know that you can no longer soothe the troubles of this boy. He will stay with me in Christ's name. For God, who created him, can bring about the full growth of his limbs without the aid of woman's milk". Everything turned out in this way. For when he was being reared by the tender mercies of the man of God, the child was accustomed to suck on Fráech's right ear as if it was the breast of his mother. In this way his will was fulfilled, since the one who could produce honey from stone made the boy grow from the contact with the ear of the man of God, as if he had had all the nourishing milk of his mother.

So although Finnsrad and Nemhnall are good Christians, the boy needs to be totally separated from his mother. The tale draws stark lines between the sexes, clearly favouring the male, since Fráech is only concerned with the child if it turns out to be a boy.⁶²⁴ When Berach is taken away from his mother, her concern is that he will suffer from another woman's milk, but the shocking reply is that the child will grow through God's power. Indeed, milk is only ever referred to with a qualifying female possessive in the whole episode. This calls into question whether the *sugere* in the passage includes the presence of milk, or just suggests the action of sucking. The location on Fráech's body is not the breast, but rather the ear, and it is never made clear whether he is expressing milk. The integrity of Fráech's masculine body is preserved. There are no awkward questions about swelling breasts and changing physical appearance that would be attendant on Findchú and Colmán's miracles. More so than in the other texts we see the author's anxiety about women and female bodies.

⁶²³ VSH, I, p. 76.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

Berach's mother is passed over in the text. The moment of birth is elided in favour of emphasising God's role in his creation. It is Fráech and his miraculous vision that forms the centre of attention when his sister is giving birth. Such erasure of the female presence, even at the moment of birth, can be seen in other saints' lives when problems with sex and female presence at the beginning of a saint's life are avoided by reducing the female presence. The manner in which this is achieved can be through a Biblical model; thus Máedóg is born to a sterile couple and Finntan's birth is preceded by an angel visiting his mother and telling her about the wonderful birth she will produce.⁶²⁵ The concentration on holy portents occludes the sex act at the centre of the birth tales. By placing some of the prophecies in the mouths of men, the Lives shift the focus from the woman giving birth, to the men around her. This is seen in the lives of Abban, Aed, Cíarán of Cluain, Cíarán of Saigir, Cóemgen, Féchin, Molaisse and Mochóemóc.⁶²⁶

However, while the female aspect of raising and feeding the child is downplayed, the relationship between Fráech and Berach is that of fosterage. The boy is taken at a young age to be taught in the skills he will need in the future by a member of his maternal family. This is done with care, *diligenti cura*, and this affection is returned in the way Berach sucks on Fráech's ear, as if it were his mother's breast. There is also an allusion to divine care in the way the author explains how God will bring the boy to full growth. The reference to the power of God 'who can produce honey from rocks' is to Deuteronomy 32:13: 'constituit eum super excelsam terram ut comederet fructus agrorum ut sugeret mel de petra oleumque de saxo durissimo' 'He set him upon the high land: that he might eat the fruits of the fields, that he might suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the hardest stone'. This comes in a passage reflecting on the great care God has for his chosen people, Deut. 32:10 'invenit eum in terra deserta in loco horroris et vastae solitudinis circumduxit eum et docuit et custodivit quasi pupillam oculi sui' 'He found him in a desert land, in a place of horror

⁶²⁵ VSH, II, p. 141, p. 295, 96. These lives draw on the precedents of Joachím and Anna and the Annunciation.

⁶²⁶ VSH, I, pp. 4-5, 34, 200-01, 217; VSH, II, pp. 76-7, 131-32, 165-66.

and of vast wilderness: he led him about and taught him: and he kept him as the apple of his eye'. The education, protection and affection that God feels for the Israelites, is the ideal way a fosterer should act towards his charge, but more importantly, it provides a masculine model of food provision and care that Fráech can fulfil.

Although the suckling miracle is not included in the Irish Life of Berach, fosterage is still presented as the reason for Fráech and Berach's bond. The affection that Fráech feels for his nephew is spelled out in the Middle Irish life: 'Ise dano Berach aon nduine isin domun roba tocha fri Cruimter Fraoch do neoch ro aerfhaemh doennacht, cenmotá Criost a aenar' 'And Berach was the one person in all the world who was dearest to Presbyter Fraech of all who ever received human nature, save Christ alone'.⁶²⁷ Fráech is said to have fostered the child until he was old enough to study, which contrasts with Berach entering the monastery of Cóemgen of Glendalough. There is still an educative element that resonates with the religious life. Berach learns his letters and how to praise God with Fráech but this is made explicitly different from his choice to join a monastery. The difference is maintained in both the Irish and Latin Lives. In the Irish Life Berach goes at age seven to learn from Daigh.⁶²⁸ The change of age is also referred to in the Latin Life, he has reached the age of discretion 'vero ad annos pervenit discretionis' and the sense of entering a monastic lifestyle: 'the abbot saint Cóemgen gave thanks to God and took him in favourably (*benigne suscepit*) beginning his plan and, placing him in a holy religious habit, taught (*edocuit*) him the standard of living well'.⁶²⁹ So unlike the fosterage of the twins in Colmán's life, which is more permanent, Berach is fostered by Fráech, which paves his way to the religious life.

In this section I have shown how the miraculous fosterage of children is not confined to the Christ Child. The miracles discussed show how fosterage could be used to create new families, albeit families with a reduced female presence. The emotional connection between the foster-fathers and their fosterlings is increased as the foster-

⁶²⁷ BNE, I, p. 26; BNE, II, p. 25.

⁶²⁸ BNE, I, p. 26.

⁶²⁹ VSH, I, p. 77.

fathers take on the nutritive role of foster-mother. The nutritive role functions alongside the educative to create excellent foster-children who become model examples of the religious life. Yet each example provides a different model for religious fosterage. While they all demonstrate a clear emotional connection, the terms of each fosterage are slightly different. Fráech, he loved and fostered Berach but he is not the one to induct Berach into a religious life. This – and the further education it requires – is a role performed by Cóemgen. Yet Berach's primary emotional connection is with Fráech, just as, in chapter one, we saw a primary emotional bond formed when a foster-child had many foster-fathers. Colmán Ela provides a different example. He takes in and teaches the twins, but there is no suggestion that they will ever leave his protection and the monastery in which they are raised. Their fates may even be more set if the twins are identified as the two monks (*macaomh*) predestined for heaven and hell respectively mentioned late in the life.⁶³⁰ This latter combination of fosterage and entry into a religious life is more fully explored in the fate of Finntan in the Life of Findchú. It is to this Life, and others like it, that I shall now turn, in order to examine the different ways religious fosterage plays with the idea of fosterage, oblation and the new family, created in the monastery.

4.5. Monastic Fosterage and Oblation

This section will examine how fosterage in a monastic setting played with the accepted narrative of fosterage seen elsewhere. Although there are constant references to *daltai*, *aite*, *alumpni*, and *nutritores* in medieval Irish saints' lives, these terms are not used as clearly as they are in narratives that do not describe the monastic experience. Indeed, as the foregoing section demonstrated, fosterage language can be used to describe different associations, ranging from fosterage to oblation. This suggests that the language of fosterage, and the relational bonds that it entailed, was the most

⁶³⁰ BNE, I, p. 182.

suitable means to render the experience of entering children to religious settings. The Irish system of relationships, created outside the blood family through education and shared experience, was interacting with the universal Christian family and the monastic community whose sense of identity was heavily invested in metaphors of family. We have already seen some views on how this monastic fosterage interacted with secular versions. Parkes has singled the monastic out as qualitatively different from fosterage elsewhere: 'Modelled on lay fosterage, the early development of Celtic monastic schools introduced a novel template of adoptive kinship tied to literate education, spiritual affiliation, and ecclesiastical advancement'.⁶³¹ I would not see this as a 'novel template' but a shifting, situationally relevant, lens through which to view the world. The religious use of fosterage does not adhere to a coherent model, but through the shifting terminology some trends can be identified.

We have seen that Finntan was, immediately after birth, fostered by Findchú. The subsequent fate of the child highlights the ways fosterage and oblation can interact. Although Findchú is a saint, through the Life he acts like a powerful secular lord.⁶³² His relationship with Finntan is coloured by this characterisation. I shall begin the discussion of how secular and monastic fosterage interacted with this example, since it highlights many of the intricacies that arise from combining these two systems. It must be remembered that Finntan is not the only boy in the Life of Findchú who is described as a fosterling, *dalta*.⁶³³ Although more space is given to Finntan, clearly having fosterlings in a monastery was no unusual practice. The difficulty comes, when we try to reconstruct the emotional life of fosterage in this period in drawing distinctions between fosterlings, monastic pupils, and those given up for oblation – if, indeed, such a distinction can be drawn.

The early career of Findchú himself, is also marked by a period of monastic fosterage. When his mother falls pregnant she is visited by a cleric who asks that the

⁶³¹ Parkes, 'Celtic Fosterage', p. 370.

⁶³² This phenomenon has been noted for Welsh saints in Elissa R. Henken, *The Welsh Saints: A Study in Patterned Lives* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 38, 45.

⁶³³ *Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, pp. 88, 93.

child in her womb be 'offered to God and devoted to study', an exhortation that is repeated when Ailbe baptises the boy.⁶³⁴ Giving a child to God inevitably draws comparisons to oblation, although the practice is not as widespread in Ireland, possibly due to the influence of fosterage. The phrase 'offering of the child to God', *idpairt do Dhia*, is unusually explicit. This Life is the only one I have studied that fulfils the first part of my definition of oblation: Findchú is handed over to God, rather than negotiating the foster relationship between human parties. The oath is fulfilled when Findchú is given to Comgall of Bangor when he reaches seven years of age: 'Comgall then asked for the child from his foster-father (*aidi*) and he was handed over to him. The boy gave love (*seirc*) to Comgall and went with him to his residence in Bangor in Ulster. He studied there with him like every other pupil (*ndalta*)'.⁶³⁵ The relationship Findchú has with Comgall is similar to the other examples of fosterage we have examined above: he asks for the boy, as Fiachra did in *Echtra Conall Gulbain*, Findchú has a loving relationship with Comgall, and the relationship centres on education. Furthermore, similar to the model of multiple fosterage examined in chapter one, Findchú is given to Cumuscach to be fostered until he is seven years old.

Findchú looks as if he is an oblate, as he has been given to God. The high-mindedness of his calling becomes more messy, human, and foster-like when he reaches seven. Models of oblation and fosterage interact to create Findchú's educational model, just as his fosterling, Finntan's education interacts with the notion of oblation. Aside from dedication to God, oblation is defined by its irrevocable nature – a facet of oblation that created much tension on the Continent.⁶³⁶ This is not something we see in the Irish sources. Findchú is offered to God before he is even born, but goes at seven to begin his education, then moves on seven years later, around the age of discretion, to his central monastic foundation. Finntan is given an explicit choice between the secular and monastic life after his return to Leinster: 'dobert a rogha dia dhalta in loechdacht no an cleirchecht, et ruc in dalta do roghain in cleirchecht'

⁶³⁴ Ibid, p. 231.

⁶³⁵ Ibid, p. 85.

⁶³⁶ de Jong, *In Samuel's Image*, pp. 77-91.

'[Findchú] gave his foster-son the choice between the life of layman and the life of a cleric and the foster-son chose the life of a cleric'.⁶³⁷ The fact that he was given a choice is illuminating. This is not something we see in other monastic fosterage narratives. It is in line, however, with contemporary thought on oblation coming from Rome, culminating in Celestine III (1191-1198), who required all oblates reaching the age of discretion to be given the choice between continuing in that profession or not.⁶³⁸ The choice given to Finntan could make us read his situation as oblation, albeit the shifting definition of oblation of the twelfth century. Yet, Finntan is not given over to God, he is handed to Finchú and he moves monastery after accepting the life of a cleric. What we see for Finntan is a form of monastic fosterage, engaging with current debates on oblation but remaining a child-rearing *sui generis*.

There are more commonalities between the monastic fosterage outlined above and other saints' lives. Findchú was reared in the house of Cumuscach before he entered his monastic training. This is similar to Moling's early life: the foundling boy is raised apart until he is old enough to study, at which point he moves into a different phase of education.⁶³⁹ Other foundlings are treated similarly. Cumméne Fota, abandoned on a cross, is raised apart in the monastery. This phase of his life is separate from his later education and when he is old enough to learn the secret of his parentage he leaves the monastery he was raised in to study with Barra.⁶⁴⁰ The secondary education usually begins at age seven, when an age is provided.⁶⁴¹ Further education in a different location to the initial fosterage, is the pattern of multiple fosterage seen in chapter one. For saints, the number of fosterers with whom they study is often higher than that of other heroes. The proliferation could be the result of semantic slipping, as fosterage terminology is applied to lay teachers, like Muiredach in *Eachtra Chonaill*

⁶³⁷ *Book of Lismore*, ed. Stokes, p. 91.

⁶³⁸ *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Emil Friedberg, 3 vols (Graz, 1959), II, pp. 573-74; Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, p. 313.

⁶³⁹ *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁴⁰ Gearóid S. Mac Eoin, 'The Life of Cumaine Fota', *Béaloides* 39/41 (1971-73), 192-205: pp. 199, 202.

⁶⁴¹ This accounts for seven being the age when fosterage begins, commonly given the secondary literature.

Gulbain, and religious *magistri* we have seen in the saints' lives. It could also arise from the political ambitions of many saints' lives, something seen in the treatment of foster-siblinghood in the monastery.

I will base my further discussion of monastic fosterage on the Life of Finbarr, who goes through three stages of fostering and education, which allows us to see some of the differences between monastic education and fosterage. He is raised by his birth parents, a set of three wandering "anchorites" and finally with a Roman cleric. In Ó Riain's view the Irish Life was composed at some point between 1196-1201, as part of a movement by the community of Augustinian canons in Cork to codify and record their history.⁶⁴² Were such motives to lie behind the composition of a life they would naturally have an effect on the presentation of his fosterage and early youth. Although the canons regular did not hold views which were as explicitly contrary to oblation as the Cistercians, they were not known for enthusiastically taking them up. Yet, where Ó Riain sees a product of the reforming canons staking their claim to Cork and associated houses, Ó Corráin sees a defence of 'old-fashioned monastic government'.⁶⁴³ In discussing how fosterage is presented through a miracle of a doe, who provides milk for the young saint, I will demonstrate how the old-fashioned notions of monastic governance were adapted to a climate less amenable to children's presence in a monastery.

The combination of reform and tradition is seen in Finbarr's education. The Continental influence begins with his baptism. Finbarr is baptised by Mac Cuirb 'bishop of Dal Modula of Corco Airchind Droma'.⁶⁴⁴ The bishop has no connections with Finbarr's family and, as a member of the secular clergy, is the more usual person to perform the baptism, rather than the abbots related in the maternal line examined above. Later Finbarr goes to Mac Cuirb to study the Book of Matthew and the Acts of the Apostles. Mac Cuirb's orthodox credentials are described in terms of a network of

⁶⁴² *Beatha Bharra. Saint Finbarr of Cork: The Complete Life*, ed. by Pádraig Ó Riain (London, 1994), p. 33.

⁶⁴³ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'The Myth and the Reality', quoted from *Beatha Bharra*, ed. Ó Riain, p. 31.

⁶⁴⁴ *Beatha Bharra*, ed. Ó Riain, p. 59.

fosterage and instruction: 'This Mac Cuirb was a notable man, and fellow-pupil (*comalta*) to David of Cell Muine, both of them had been pupils (*dhalta*) of Gregory of Rome.'⁶⁴⁵ This places Finbarr in a wider European context, as his fosterer/tutor is foster-sibling to David of Wales and his education comes down from the Pope. Yet even these relationships are described with foster terminology.

However, between his baptism and later study, Finbarr is taken in by three wandering clerks. They come to Finbarr's parents' house and, seeing the boy shining with holiness, say that they wish to teach him. They take him away, miraculously feed him with the milk of a wild doe and establish his place of instruction where the miracle occurs. They shear his hair, change his name and enter him into their religious life. The actions of the wandering anchorites are similar to those of the miraculous fosterers: Fráech baptises and names Berach and Colmán inducts the twins into the monastic life. Unlike those children, Finbarr is raised with his family until he is seven: 'he was reared (*ro hoiledh*) for seven years'.⁶⁴⁶ When the clerks originally come, they refuse to take the boy until he has grown; they are only educating and are not willing to nurse the child. Yet they do provide milk from the doe, which, combined with the education, makes their role that of secondary fosterers. The language used in the section centres on the educative. The elder says that 'ro budh maith lind leighenn do dénamh do' 'it would be a pleasure to us to teach him' and when they establish their house in Muincille, 'is ann cóir tinnscetall leighinn dó' 'it is a fit place for his instruction to commence'.⁶⁴⁷ In this sense, Finbarr is taken away from home to be fostered, but the fosterage is presented in such way as to avoid the possible associations with oblation to better accord with the reform views of the compilers.

The fosterage element, nutritive or otherwise, is absent from the Latin *vita*. The two Latin Lives have been discussed in terms of dating, by Sharpe.⁶⁴⁸ Although explicit

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 65. For more on David and Irish saints' relationship to Wales see Karen Jankulak, 'Carantoc *alias* Cairnech?: British saints, Irish saints, and the Irish in Wales', in *Ireland and Wales*, ed. Wooding and Jankulak, pp. 116-48.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 59.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, p. 393.

fosterage terminology is absent, less attention is paid to the age of Finbarr when he is taken by the anchorites. In this light we can read the feeding miracle as fulfilling the needs of nutritive fosterage – even if it is not explicitly framed as such. The miracle of a wild animal coming to feed a young saint, is found in many other lives. Finbarr had been reared, *nutrierunt*, at the house of his parents. However, no time limit is put on the rearing and the clerics take him away at the same time, *eodem tempore*. Finbarr is still a youth when he is taken by the anchorites since he leaves them when he reaches maturity, *aetatem maturam*.⁶⁴⁹ In this light it is interesting to revisit the miraculously milked doe:

'sitiens puer, multum fleuit, et quesivit potum lactis. Tunc videntes cervam prope in monte, unus senior illorum dixit ministro suo: "Perge ad cervam illam, et mulge eam, et potum lactis duc puero ab ea; quia sanctitas pueri faciet eam mitem tibi." At ille confidens in verbo senioris, perrexit ad eam; et illa ante ministrum erat mitissima, sicut ad vitulum suum; et mulsit ille ab ea vas plenum lacte et duxit puero, et ipse bibit, et extinctus est sitis eius'.⁶⁵⁰

'The boy was thirsty and he cried, looking for a drink of milk. Then one of the elder amongst them, saw a hind nearby on the mountainside and said to his servant: "Go to that hind and milk her then give the boy a drink of her milk. For the holiness of the boy will make her calm around you." He trusted the words of the elder and went up to her. The hind was very calm around the servant, as if with her own fawn. He milked a vessel full of milk from her and took it to the boy. The boy drank it and his thirst was sated.'

The image of the child crying out for milk highlights the young age at which the child was given up, although he is referred to as *puer* throughout, rather than *infans*.⁶⁵¹ This is brought out by the juxtaposition of *fleuit* and *quesivit*; he asks for milk through non-verbal crying. The suggestions of Finbarr's youth fit with his desire for milk. Such desire is particularly associated with extreme youth in the Life of Brendan. Here the saint is slightly older, having spent five years with Íte after he has been weaned. Although there are no cows to hand Brendan is overcome with a desire for milk 'more puerilis etatis lac concupisceret'.⁶⁵² This prompts a similar miracle to the

⁶⁴⁹ VSH I, pp. 66-8.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 67.

⁶⁵¹ Using such terminology to infer the age of a character is notoriously difficult but it is worth remarking upon.

⁶⁵² VSH, I, p. 99.

one above, but since Brendan is older the hind comes to him alone and the experience is not controlled by his elders.

In the Life of Finbarr, it is the *senior* and his *minister* who mediate the miracle. This mirrors how we would expect young children to be fed in a monastery. Monastic rules that address children spend much time discussing their diet. Their diet was often the particular concern of some specialised members of the community. In Hildemar's commentary on the Rule of Benedict, three or four masters were assigned to groups of children.⁶⁵³ In the Irish saints' lives, something similar is seen in Collanach's customary position of power over the sons of kings and princes, as described in the Life of Moling.

Finally, Finbarr leaves the anchorites and goes to study in Rome with Pope Gregory alongside a collection of other saints. The Continental seal of approval seems to work contrary to his Irish fosterage. Finbarr shows that monastic fosterage, both in educative and nutritive roles, takes place in multiple locations and with multiple instructors. This is not restricted to Finbarr. In the Life of Berach, after he has been raised by Fráech, he goes to study with Cóemgen. The age at which he leaves his initial fosterage is described as the 'age of discretion (*annos ... discretionis*)'.⁶⁵⁴ This is often thought to be seven years old, a view confirmed by Berach's Irish Life, when he goes to Daigh mac Cairill when he reaches seven years of age.⁶⁵⁵ Although the verb used in this instance is one of learning rather than fosterage, Daigh is called Berach's foster-father, *oide*.⁶⁵⁶

The Life in which these different fosterage stages are most clearly laid out is the *Vita Prima Sancti Brendani*. After Brendan is born he is baptised by Bishop Erc, under whose instruction his parents are living a chaste life. Once he has been named he is left to be reared by his parents until he has been weaned, (*ablactationis*). The bishop then hands Brendan over to Íte, who, as we have seen, often takes in saintly fosterlings. In all this the bishop is the one to retain power, naming the child and passing him on.

⁶⁵³ *Expositio regulae ab Hildemaro*, ed. by Rupert Mittermüller (Regensburg, 1880), pp. 331-2, 578.

⁶⁵⁴ VSH, I, p. 77.

⁶⁵⁵ Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, (London, 1990), p. 113.

⁶⁵⁶ BNE, I, p. 26.

The parents provide nursing but not much more than that. He reaches *annos fandi* while staying with Íte, so although he has been weaned, he is still quite young. After five years, he goes from her to further his studies: 'ad se eum episcopus adduxit, atque litteras edocuit'. Later, when the boy wants to seek out bishop Iarlaith, he returns to his foster-mother to receive her blessing: 'ut benedictionem eius hereditate possideret'.⁶⁵⁷

The relationship most emotionally resonant for Brendan is with Íte. His first words express his desire to always be with her and she is a recurring feature throughout his life. She does not have to miraculously provide food for her young charge, as he has stayed with his natural mother until he was weaned. Íte fulfils a primarily emotional role, beyond bodily need. The picture that emerges from the accounts of monastic fosterage studied here, is one similar to the model of multiple fosterage examined in chapter one. Although more than one fosterer may be sought for specific educational needs, the emotional bond is created with one set of fosterers. Unlike secular fosterage, the monastic one often begins later in life, around the age of discretion. Furthermore, monastic fosterage was more prone to add further fosterers. The *Vita prima* of Brendan makes clear the situation we find in many other saints' lives. There are multiple educators, who enter, leave and re-enter the saint's life. Sometimes they are described as foster-parents, at other times they are merely educators. The difficulty we have in deciding who is a fosterer and who is not, speaks to the fluid way in which this terminology is employed in a religious context. The secular fosterage is expanded upon and the model of oblation is altered. The picture that emerges is a model of child-rearing influenced by secular fosterage and oblation, but distinct from those two methods. The emotional ties that monastic fosterage creates are similarly unique.

⁶⁵⁷ VSH, I, pp. 99-102

4.6. Conclusion

In order to reconstruct the emotional community of fosterage in medieval Ireland, I have formed each chapter around a different question related to that community. For the beginning of this chapter I have focussed on the Old Irish poem, *Ísucán*. The poem, which describes a close affective bond created between the speaker and the Christ Child, is placed within a wider narrative of monastic fosterage. The context that this chapter has provided for the poem allows us to see that fosterage occurred within religious settings in ways that were very similar to secular fosterage. Indeed, so similar were these practices that elements of the monastic have bled into modern secondary literature on fosterage, especially in the case of fosterage beginning at seven. There are differences in how the two systems functioned but the results were the same: long-lasting, deep connections between adults and children not related by blood. These connections lasted beyond the period of nutritive and educative care. Where fosterage, in the strict legal sense, was not present, it was still the means by which the medieval Irish read and understood these affective relationships.

Although *Ísucán* is a much-studied poem, the image of the Christ Child it presents still has much to offer. It has often been explained away as merely affective. Bledsoe described it in the following terms: 'The Old Irish poem *Ísucán* is an endearing account of Ita's breastfeeding of the Christ Child, told in the saint's own voice'.⁶⁵⁸ Bledsoe places the poem in the context of spiritual motherhood, which may seem natural to a modern audience but misses the wider application that comes with a fosterage reading. Quin analysed the poem in terms of the legal language and while this is relevant to our understanding, it glosses over the emotional connection that lies at the heart of the poem. The affective ties and the social bonds are combined when the poem is read through the lens of fosterage. When an emotionally resonant connection to the divine needs to be created, fosterage is the best way to represent it.

⁶⁵⁸ Jenny Bledsoe, 'St Ita of Killeedy and Spiritual Motherhood in the Irish Hagiographical Tradition', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 32 (2012), 1-29: p. 12

Yet the poem and its prose introduction are not isolated. The prose highlights the fosterage imagery and the visitation of the Christ Child is seen elsewhere in the medieval Irish corpus. Demonstrating an affective bond with the divine is best accomplished by having a saint foster the Christ Child. We saw chapter two that human relationships to the divine can be characterised through fosterage. This is useful, not just for the foster-mother of the saints of Ireland, but for many others. Analysing the miracles attributed to Adomnán, Moling, Eithne, and Sodelb, reaffirms the conclusions made from a study of *Ísucán*. The contextual studies also affirm the benefit of reading these miracles as examples of fosterage rather than motherhood. The wider application of fosterage as the means by which strong emotional bonds are created between adults and children gives this miracle a gender-neutral application. The speaker in the *Ísucán* poem is not identified as either gender, it is the later prose that associates it with Íte.

The notion of a gender-neutral way to bring children into the monastic life would obviously have its appeal to all-male societies that need to replicate themselves. Monastic fosterage provides the base from which the metaphor of fostering the Christ Child is built. The Christ Child metaphor is purely emotional, not based on the nutritive and educative elements of fostering other children. In studying the miraculous breastfeeding, I have shown how the educative and nutritive elements of fosterage were combined. The monastic fosterage that is presented in a miraculous form, shows how children were incorporated into the monastic community and how their relationship with the head of that community mirrors the relationship with a foster-parent. Although the male saints studied in this section adopt a female gendered role, they subvert that femininity in order to create an all-male family. Crucially this family is still marked by affectionate bonds.

Even when the miraculous focuses on nutritive fosterage centred on the breast – the male breast in this case – educational fosterage is never wholly absent. Colmán's cousins take on special learning skills along with the milk and honey produced in Colmán's breasts. The final section of this chapter focussed on the narratives of

education in medieval Irish saints' lives, concentrating on the figure of Finbarr of Cork. The additional layers of education needed in the religious setting expands the educational remit of secular fosterage. The limited secondary fosterage outlined in chapter one is expanded to include more educational relationships. There are still a few nutritive ones, even for older children, as the miracles of the doe from the mountain demonstrate. Yet, just as in chapter one, there is always a central fosterer with more emotional resonance. For Brendan this is found with Íte, as he explains his joyful expression to his *nutrix* 'quia video te semper mihi loqui'.⁶⁵⁹ Monastic fosterage is a novel blend of different child-rearing strategies, more expansive than secular fosterage, looser and more human than oblation.

In order to understand the six stanza poem *Ísucán*, we need to understand the relationship between children and adults in the monastery. As we saw for the *flán* band in chapter three, fosterage provides a vocabulary and way of expressing the emotions and relationships created here. An appreciation of how fosterage was used outside the foster-family draws out the contemporary assumptions surrounding that institution. The relationship can be complex but is based on a foundation of love and affection. Even with older children there is a strong physical element to the expression of love within fosterage. Rosenwein has said of reconstructing emotional lives that we need to 'read the metaphors'.⁶⁶⁰ I have taken this advice for understanding monastic fosterage, but we need to be aware that this is more than a metaphor. While the relationships are not the same as those in secular fosterage, the legal ties are not so evident, the texts still describe physical relationships. There are fosterage bonds, even if they do not strictly adhere to the secular definition. This chapter shows how fosterage was used as a filter through which to express the emotions arising within the monastery.

⁶⁵⁹ VSH, I, p. 99.

⁶⁶⁰ Rosenwein, 'Problems and Methods', p. 18.

5. Animal Fosterage: A bestial parallel?

5.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter we have seen the language of fosterage and its relationships used outside the traditional foster-family. In one of the most striking images, Íte refers to the giant beetle eating her side as her fosterling, *dalta*. In this chapter I will turn my attention to how the fosterage relationship was imagined to work between humans and animals. Tales of animal and human interaction are, of course, common in the Middle Ages. As Bintley and Williams have recently commented ‘this was an age better acquainted and more comfortable than our own with shape-shifters, monsters, talking animals, and the repeating cycle of the agricultural year: the boundaries observed between humans and animals throughout much of the modern world would have been far less rigid to many in the early Middle Ages’.⁶⁶¹ The interaction is close, but it is not always described as fosterage; sometimes feeding is just feeding. However, as seen throughout this thesis, fosterage ties can be created through nurturing and care, without legal reinforcement. Sometimes an animal is placed in such an emotionally constituted foster relationship with a human. Examining these relationships will highlight some of the contemporary assumptions that surround that bond. A choice is made to frame such nurturing as fosterage and since the fosterage is outside of its usual place, what precisely that choice entails is made explicit. The novelty of having a fosterage bond created between a man and wolf, places the fosterage relationship in a new light, a light that I will use to help reconstruct the emotional community of fosterage.

⁶⁶¹ Michael D. J. Bintley and Thomas J. T. Williams, ‘Introduction’ in *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia* ed. by Michael D. J. Bintley and Thomas J. T. Williams (Woodbridge, 2015), pp. 1-12: p. 4.

As with the other chapters in this thesis, I will take a central case study as the key to unlocking human and animal fosterage. This is the Life of Ailbe, who was fostered by a wolf in the wilderness and who protected his foster-mother and foster-brothers from hunters later in his life. The Life is preserved in Latin and Irish versions; the Irish seems to be a translation of the Latin but the linguistic choices made are still illuminating.⁶⁶² Ailbe is not the only character to have been fostered by wolves: Cormac mac Airt, the famous high-king of Ireland has his own wolf foster-brothers, although he does not have such a close relationship with his she-wolf foster-mother.⁶⁶³ These two stand out as examples of human/animal fosterage. As we have seen in the previous chapter with Finbarr, saints can be fed miraculously by wild animals but these are not considered fosterage, as the animal's presence is mediated by humans.⁶⁶⁴ Similarly, the heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt reminds us that a child abandoned in the wilderness and raised by wild animals is a common trope from Indo-European heroic literature. The Classical sources that describes such abandonments and raising were translated into Irish over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁶⁶⁵ Within all these human/animal interactions, only a few were described as fosterage and investigating the emotional connection in those cases, will show us which interactions created fosterage bonds.

The connections made between animals and saints often blur the boundaries of the human and animal realm. Saints have been studied for how they define what is the human, in contrast to what is not human, the animal.⁶⁶⁶ Since the saint stands as the archetypal human, this affects how they relate to the animal. Alexander, in his study of animals and saints, often reads the animal encounters for what they can tell us about the saint's life and community. Analysing the miracle of Columba's horse mourning

⁶⁶² For details of the Latin manuscript tradition see Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, p. 390. The Irish life is preserved in Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 1 A iv, ff. 97-119 and Brussels MS 2324-40.

⁶⁶³ Hull, 'Geneamuin Chormac', pp. 82-5.

⁶⁶⁴ *Beatha Bharra*, ed. Ó Riain, p. 59.

⁶⁶⁵ O'Connor, 'Irish Narrative Literature and the Classical Tradition', pp. 13-16.

⁶⁶⁶ David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature*, (Woodbridge, 2001).

the imminent death of the saint he says ‘It is not *nature* that is being depicted here, it is *society*’.⁶⁶⁷ In this chapter’s examples, we will see how animals engage with the human, social institution of fosterage, but in a way that highlights their natural nurturing roles. The appeal to nature as a pure exemplar of what humanity should be is often found in the *Hexaemeron* and this tradition is picked up on in examples of animal fosterage.⁶⁶⁸ Finally, the nurturing role of animals draws them closer to the human, as represented by woman. Salisbury has noted how archetypal elements of femininity were linked to the animal which makes the wolf’s nurturing and love poured out to the child more intelligible within a human sphere.⁶⁶⁹ This background is useful in examining why fosterage was used to actively blur the boundary between animal and human.

The medieval Irish were aware that animals could suckle offspring that were not their own. This is miraculously demonstrated when saints cause wolves to suckle cows, in the place of calves they have killed. This common miracle was performed by saints Berach, Cóemgen, Féchin, Finan and Gerald of Mayo.⁶⁷⁰ While each version is different, the common thread is the miraculous trans-species feeding that allows the cow to be milked or saves it from pain. It is interesting to note that the miracle as recounted in the Life of Cóemgen, is explicit about the unnatural relationship between the wolf and cow. Cóemgen says to the wolf: ‘She [the cow] will love you, by the power of God, even if it is against nature (*contra naturam*)’.⁶⁷¹ That other animals can feed one another is not a problem, it is the affection that the cow would have for the wolf that is against nature. Love is an integral part of this miracle as well as the version told in Féchin’s life. Nutritive care and love seemingly go together, as demonstrated in more

⁶⁶⁷ Dominic Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, (Woodbridge, 2008), p. 60. Such a phenomenon is not isolated to saints, however, as we will see in the proliferation of animal names within the *fian*.

⁶⁶⁸ *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage, (Washington, 1961); PL 14:219-72.

⁶⁶⁹ Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London, 2011), pp. 136-37.

⁶⁷⁰ VSH, I, pp. 78, 239; II, pp. 78, 94, 110.

⁶⁷¹ VSH, I, p. 239.

pedestrian fashion in a law text on calves with ‘two mothers’, that is to say what to do when the calf of one farmer feeds off the cow of another. The judgement is that the calf belongs to the mother which bears it, not the one which fed it: ‘Ni la boin ailes .i. nocho leisin mboin roailestar, ge rochar’ ‘It does not belong to the cow which rears it, i.e. it does not belong to the cow which reared it, though she loved it’.⁶⁷² Love is seen as central to the feeding provided, and the love is not associated with the birth mother. What is more striking about this law code is that it mentions the love at all. It is felt that the love created by the nursing needs to be explained away; not only is love attendant on nursing but that love is the basis for a claim on the calf, though one that the law disavows. The verb used for rearing here is the same one used for fosterage elsewhere, so we see fosterage at work within the animal world, as well as between humans and animals.

The Life of Ailbe addresses the image of animal fosterage directly and as such, the role of the animal in Ailbe’s life has attracted scholarly criticism to explain their close connection. I will discuss other responses to the wolf as foster-mother, which owes a great debt to the historiographical tradition of reconstructing older pagan myths from medieval Christian documents. The second, and largest, section examines the trope of foundlings cast into the wilderness and how the Irish made this trope their own. The relationships continue after the original nursing, in this sense mirroring the continued relationships of fosterage. The idea that humans, especially human children, are not so different from animals is taken up in the fourth section, which addresses how the *ffianaigecht* literature blurs this line to describe the youths of the *ffian*. The conclusions that I draw from this is that animals and children naturally fit together in these liminal spaces. The final section returns to Ailbe and how his wolf foster-mother is presented as human. It is not just humans who can become bestial, as in the *ffianaigecht*, but that some animals can become human. Indeed, this is the conclusion that I wish to draw from the case of Ailbe. Notions of “natural” goodness and innocence

⁶⁷² Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: a study based mainly on the law-texts of the 7th and 8th centuries AD* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 543-547.

conflict with the picture of fosterage as a distinctly human practice. For animals to engage in it, they must leave something of the bestiality behind. The medieval Irish were aware that fosterage was a human response to the problem of childrearing. It was a powerful tool to create affection and deep ties between different families, even those who were inimical to one another, as we saw in the example of Gormlaith Uí Dhomnaill. Some authors took this power of fosterage and strikingly applied it to animals.

5.2. The Life Ailbe and the Role of Wolves

In this first section I will introduce some of the texts I will be analysing. The *Vita sancti Albei* exemplifies many of these concerns and will appear throughout this chapter. The text is preserved in four manuscripts. There has been much discussion of the dating of the life. Originally thought by Kenney to be no earlier than the twelfth century, this view has been criticised.⁶⁷³ Sharpe placed it among the O'Donohue lives, although the problems with Sharpe's approach and the unity of the O'Donohue lives have been questioned above.⁶⁷⁴ Such a dating has been supported by Herbert, who suggests that the life was composed during the reign of Cathal mac Finguine (713-742).⁶⁷⁵ Schaffer has drawn on this work and has argued for a date of composition somewhere in the second half of the eighth century, based on the political concerns she sees addressed in the *vita*.⁶⁷⁶

Where there has been previous discussion of the animal connections of Ailbe and Cormac mac Airt, it has concentrated on their supposed mythic origins. I shall briefly address the conclusions drawn from these studies, although my own approach

⁶⁷³ James F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: An Introduction and Guide*, 2nd edition (Columbia, 1966), p. 314

⁶⁷⁴ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, pp. 297-8, 329. See the comments on p. 204 of this thesis.

⁶⁷⁵ Máire Herbert, 'Literary Sea-voyages and Early Munster Hagiography', in *Celtic Connections*, ed. Black and others, pp. 182-89: p. 182.

⁶⁷⁶ Bridgitte Schaffer, 'Statements of Power in the Language of Genealogy: St Ailbe's Roots', *Quaestio Insularis* 5 (2005), 23-41: p. 39.

is much more synchronic. McCone has addressed these two tales, among others, as examples of the international heroic pattern and affirming some of the divinely elected aspects of the two men.⁶⁷⁷ Cormac's birth has been analysed through the mythopoeic lens before. The classic of study is Ó Cathasaigh's *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt*, in which his stated aim in discussing the idea of heroic biography is 'to show that Cormac's biography, as it is presented in SE [Scéla Éogain agus Cormaic], GC [Geneamuin Chormaic] and some other texts is essentially a realization of this international pattern'.⁶⁷⁸ While such an approach is useful in placing these Irish tales within a wider European context and as a reflection of deeper narrative trends, I wish to view the texts as communicating with one particular audience, in a specific cultural setting. In the mythic model the wolves are not beasts but become markers of wilderness, representations of the positive and negative aspects of the cosmic order that are to be bound together in the figure of the sacral king. This line of argument has also been applied to Ailbe. In one discussion McCone concludes, on the basis of the canine rearing and the fact that the saint shares a name with Mac Da Thó's famous hound, that there is 'a strong case for regarding Ailbe of Emly as a Christianised version of a pagan hound guardian of the Otherworld'.⁶⁷⁹ This is not the line of argument I will be taking in this chapter. Rather, I wish to assess how the nutritive care, given by the wolves to these boys, would have been read in a contemporary light. My focus will be on the presentation of fosterage, similar to the way fosterage was foregrounded in the material surrounding *Ísucán* and how we should approach the early life of Cú Chulainn.

Fosterage is not absent from other readings. In his discussion of different life stages, McCone points out the similarities between fosterage and rearing in the wilderness. They both represent a separation from home. He uses Brigit for his example: 'For Brigit fosterage with a Christian woman combines with the drinking of

⁶⁷⁷ McCone, *Pagan Past*, pp. 191-94.

⁶⁷⁸ Ó Cathasaigh, *Biography of Cormac*, p. 1.

⁶⁷⁹ Kim McCone, 'An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives', *The Maynooth Review/Revieú Mhá Nuad* 11 (1984), 26-59: p. 50.

a white cow's milk to mark a marginal state on the way from paganism to Christianity. In the case of some other heroes, the implied contrast *home vs. away* is intensified to *civilized inside vs. wild outside* or the like by being reared in the wilderness by an animal, typically a she-wolf, as in the cases of Cormac and St. Ailbe'.⁶⁸⁰ Brigit's experience is of fosterage and the miraculous food links her, in some ways, to Ailbe. However, her experience is different from Ailbe and Cormac's. Brigit's food is an additional marker, coming from a miraculously appearing cow, but it does not affect the nature of her fosterage. She receives her Christian education at the same time as engaging in novel food practices. As in the case of Finbarr summoning the wild doe from the mountainside as a mark of his sanctity, the animal merely provides milk within a human fosterage system.⁶⁸¹ They are miraculous counterparts of cows and sheep that would normally provide milk.⁶⁸² Importantly the cow is never thought to take on the role of fosterer, with all the emotional weight that this role entails, unlike the wolves under discussion here.

5.3. Children Gone to the Dogs

In order for the animals to take on a fosterage role in the texts under examination, the child has to leave human society. In many of these fosterage narratives the children are abandoned in the wilderness. In this section I wish to discuss why unwanted children were thought to be thrown to the beasts and what such stories tell us about fosterage. The trope is known from the international heroic biography, mentioned above, and for our purposes it introduces a number of questions and paradoxes that surround that nurturing of children by wild beasts.⁶⁸³ In these tales the usual logic of wilderness/civilisation, man/beast, and safety/danger is reversed. In the human homes where a child would expect to be reared in safety, they are in danger. The wilderness

⁶⁸⁰ McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, p. 194.

⁶⁸¹ VSH I, p67; *Beatha Bharra*, ed. Ó Riain, p. 59.

⁶⁸² Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 351.

⁶⁸³ The hero raised by a wolf in the wilderness is motif B 311.1 in Thompson, *Motif-Index*.

that is supposed to be the site of their death, however, provides the shelter and food that their human families do not. This paradox makes some sense when viewed through the lens of fosterage. We have already seen elsewhere that the natal home can be dangerous. Finntan's mother flees Leinster, Moling's own mother tries to kill him, Cairenn is always suffering under Mongfind.⁶⁸⁴ If home is terrifying, it does not necessarily follow that the wilderness is comforting. The comfort comes from the fosterage with wild animal, which demonstrates that love for children is to be found even in the wilderness. Yet the threat that hangs over the wilderness is reminiscent of the uncertain outcome of fosterage, an uncertainty reflected when it is called one of the three dark things.⁶⁸⁵ This ambiguity affects how we view the dichotomy of safe wilderness and threatening home.

Ailbe is not condemned to death because of the inconvenient nature of his conception. He is abandoned because a female slave in the household of king Cronan secretly becomes pregnant. The king will not stand for it and orders the boy be killed:

Inspirante autem Spiritu Sancto in servis illis, non occiderunt puerum; set sub quadam petra posuerunt eum, ibique reliquerunt; ubi nomen eius usque hodie adoratur. Sub petra autem eadem fera lupa habitabat, que sanctum puerum valde adamavit, [et] quasi mater tenera inter suos catulos leniter eum nutrit.⁶⁸⁶

However, his servants were moved by the Holy Spirit and they did not kill the boy. They placed him under a certain rock and left him; now his name is praised there even up to today. Under this same rock a wild she-wolf lived and she very greatly loved the holy boy. Like a tender mother, she carefully fostered him among her own pups.

The wolf's reaction, to take the child into her family, feed him and love him like a mother, contrasts strikingly with the order to put the new-born boy to death. While the wolf acts as a foster-mother in both her actions and emotions, the human king demands the boy be killed. He phrases his command in a way that clearly draws out the distinction between civilisation and wilderness, and introduces the idea of fosterage: 'This new-born boy, born from a slave girl, will never live under the roof of

⁶⁸⁴ Stokes, 'The Death of Crimthainn', pp. 190-91.

⁶⁸⁵ *Triads*, ed. Meyer, pp. 32-3.

⁶⁸⁶ VSH, I, p. 46.

my house (*sub mee culmine domus*) nor will he be reared (*nutritus*) among my sons'.⁶⁸⁷ This specific denial of a princely fostering throws Ailbe's subsequent fostering into sharper relief. The human world focuses on the status of the child and Ailbe's death is motivated by social concerns, all of which is contrasted to the love given by the wolf, where ties are created by spontaneous love.

Although according to the law female bondmaids were exempt from having to care for their children, it is not clear that in this case the child would automatically become Cronan's responsibility.⁶⁸⁸ Yet the king's statement suggests that Ailbe would have been fostered in the royal household, alongside the princely children, suggesting that tensions of status are at work. The king feels he is being forced to foster a slave child. Although fosterage was a means by which new familial bonds could be created, the participants were still bound by pre-existing social hierarchies in which status played a defining role. We saw this at work in the tensions between foster-siblings examined in chapter three and the 'sons of kings and high-kings' fostered in *Ísucán*.

The command to kill the unwanted child followed by remorse of those entrusted to carry out the act, is a common trope seen from Classical literature onwards. The trope introduces a number of entangled ideas about the emotions at play between the abandoned child and those abandoning it. The notion of abandonment needs to be treated separately from the raising by wolves. Boswell still has the most comprehensive survey of child abandonment for the period under examination.⁶⁸⁹ He concludes that the famous tales of abandonment to be found in Classical mythology present the practice as usual and a more acceptable alternative to infanticide.⁶⁹⁰ In the medieval Irish context the high honour price attached to a child under seven would make abandonment a more attractive proposition than murder.⁶⁹¹ In the examples I examine, although death is allotted to the children, something prevents the servants

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸ CIH 1575.14.

⁶⁸⁹ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 181-266; Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, pp. 121-44.

⁶⁹⁰ Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers*, pp. 78-79.

⁶⁹¹ Ní Chonaill, 'Child-centred Law', p. 7.

from carrying out the task, either divine inspiration or pity. The child still evokes some emotions of loyalty and pity.

Aside from Ailbe, other texts mention children abandoned but rescued by animals. Mess Buachalla, from *Tochmarc Étaíne*, is another child who finds safety with animals after she has been condemned to death. *Tochmarc Étaíne* has a complicated textual history and Mess Buachalla's abandonment is found in only one of the three surviving versions of the tale.⁶⁹² Thurneysen has described the surviving tale as an eleventh-century retelling of a ninth-century original.⁶⁹³ Here the king is the father of the child to be killed and does not want to see her live because she is the product of unknowing incest between him and his daughter. The people of the household assigned to the task abandon the child but do not put her in a pit of beasts, *piastaib*, as commanded. Their motivation for this act of mercy is not mentioned.⁶⁹⁴ They leave the child in a kennel with a bitch and her pups in the house of a herdsman on the side of a mountain. A comparison of Ailbe and Mess Buachalla demonstrates some of the features that make Ailbe's fosterage exceptional.

The comparison will focus on the location of the abandonment and the type of animal who cares for the child. In so doing, I will show that Ailbe's fosterage is not the inevitable result of narrative tropes but rather a deliberate choice designed to express a special relationship between Ailbe and the she-wolf, something absent from Mess Buachalla's narrative. As regards the location, in both cases there seems to be a move away from settled society, the royal households of kings Cronan and Eochaid, into the wilderness. When Ailbe is thrown out, Cronan uses the image of the roof beam to highlight the constructed shelter that Ailbe is expelled from and it contrasts with the rock under which he was left. Although Mess Buachalla is taken to the house of a herdsman, so she does not appear to have left civilisation, this is said to be 'in the midst

⁶⁹² National Library of Ireland, MS G 4, cols. 985-997. For comments on the complicated textual history of *Tochmarc Étaíne* see Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', pp. 137-196.

⁶⁹³ Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1921), p. 598.

⁶⁹⁴ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 188.

of a wilderness (*i mmedon dithruib*).⁶⁹⁵ The external wilderness works in tandem with the bestial and uncivilised nature of their upbringing. It forms part of the paradox that lies at the heart of these tales: the children are threatened by secure settings and structures and find safety and love in seemingly inimical environments and beings. The ideas of fear and insecurity colour the emotional experience of fosterage: fear of the unknown turning to love and affection.

The tale of Mess Buachalla is preserved in two texts. In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the unwanted child is left with the bitch and her pups, although this is omitted from the version of the abandonment found in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*.⁶⁹⁶ Although the girl was taken to this house in the wilderness, a hut with a bitch and her pups is very different from a she-wolf raising her children under a rock. Although the kennel could be interpreted as the 'pit of beasts' into which the king commanded she be thrown, it seems unlikely. The word *péist* can refer to any harmful animal. In the earlier literature this was restricted to fabulous beasts and monsters such as the lake creatures tamed by saints, although this changed to encompass reptiles and other verminous creatures.⁶⁹⁷ The force of the word is more on these harmful reptilian creatures than mammals. In the *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* version, the pleasant features of the child are supposed to melt the men's hearts so that they do not kill her.⁶⁹⁸ The child elicits this protective emotion in the men and, while the dog is assumed to feed the child until the herdsman and his wife return, this is merely hinted at and the bitch does not demonstrate her emotions. The animal does not play a significant role in the emotional life of Mess Buachalla.

Just as Mess Buachalla is abandoned in a domestic setting, so the animal who cares for her is domesticated. The differences between dogs and wolves is central to our understanding of how the ideas of danger and safety are used in the depictions of fosterage. The Irish language does not make much of distinction between wolves and

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁶ TBDD, p. 3.

⁶⁹⁷ eDIL, s.v. *píast* (*péist*).

⁶⁹⁸ TBDD, p. 3.

dogs, the usual word for dog, *cú*, can mean wolf when used in compounds, and there are many circumlocutions for wolf that use *cú*.⁶⁹⁹ In the early life of Cormac this distinction is played upon as he is raised by a *mac tíre* in the wilderness, highlighting the danger of his positions but his wolf foster-brothers, with whom he has a much more positive relationship are described as *cú*.⁷⁰⁰ For Ailbe and Mess Buachalla, however, the distinctions are made clearer. Mess Buachalla is put with a bitch and her pups (don tsaid cona cuilenaib).⁷⁰¹ The use of the specific word for bitch, *sod*, moves us away from any associations with dog and highlights the maternal instinct of the animal.⁷⁰² The sense has shifted from wolves to dogs and so draws in notions of the faithfulness of dogs to their human masters.

Ailbe's Latin life is more precise in its identification of the wolf. Not only is she *lupa* but she is also *fera*. This last adjective is unnecessary as there are no domesticated wolves, and is used throughout the Life to draw out her wild and savage nature.⁷⁰³ In this context, her tenderness towards the child is even more surprising. Within Irish literature the negative association of wolves is seen in their connection with raiders. In *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* the phrase *oc fáelad* 'wolfing' is used to describe the activities of raiders.⁷⁰⁴ This is a human reflection of the depredations of wolves on flocks. The way to guard against these attacks is describe in laws on herding.⁷⁰⁵ In contemporary natural philosophical literature wolves are said to be very fierce, especially towards children. In the words of Bartholomaeus Anglicus in *De proprietatibus rerum*: 'Lupus quando comedit est valde malus et quando non habet fames quiescat multum. Et est valde audax et valde diligit ludere et si potest rapere puerum, ludit cum eo et post occidit eius et comedit' 'The wolf is very evil when it

⁶⁹⁹ Kuno Meyer, *Contributions to Irish Lexicography* (Halle, 1906), p. 29. For example, *cú glas* is often translated as 'grey wolf'. *Cú allaid* is also used to designate wolves. Finally, *mac tíre*, son of the land, is another common circumlocution for wolf. This is the word used in *Geneamuin Chormaic*.

⁷⁰⁰ Hull, 'Geneamuin Chormaic', p. 84; Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography*, p. 121.

⁷⁰¹ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 188.

⁷⁰² eDil, s.v. *sod*, *sad*.

⁷⁰³ The consistent use of *fera* with the wolf could be a kind of calque on the Irish terms like *cú allaid* and *mac tíre* discussed above.

⁷⁰⁴ TBDD, p. 7; McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fíana*', pp. 1-22.

⁷⁰⁵ Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 186-87.

feeds and it rests much when it is not hungry. It is very daring and delights in playing with, and if possible, seizing children; it toys with them and afterwards kills them and eats them'.⁷⁰⁶ This concern with wolves eating children can also be seen in Stephen of Bourbon's description of devotion to Guinefort, the holy greyhound. Part of the devotion to the shrine of the noble hound entails leaving children at this shrine near the woods: 'One woman also told me that she had just invoked the fauns and was withdrawing from the scene when she saw the wolf come out of the forest towards the baby. If maternal love has not made her feel pity and go back for him, the wolf, or as she put it, the devil in the shape of a wolf would have devoured the baby'.⁷⁰⁷ Maternal devotion is introduced as the only antidote to bestial hunger, opposing the rapacious wilderness with the nurturing mother. The story of Guinefort's martyrdom itself demonstrates the faithfulness of dogs and their devotion to children, antithetical to the murderous intentions of the wolf.

The positive qualities of the dog or the negative qualities of the wolf could be passed onto the children they rear. Looking outside the Ailbe narrative again, we find that although Mess Buachalla is maintained by the bitch until the herdsman and his wife return, her association with the dog does not seem to have altered her. Furthermore the return of the herdsman ends Mess Buachalla's association with the dog. She is not fostered, this is rather more fleeting circumstance. The character of a child can be altered by the nursing it receives and in other cases, such bestial nursing can cause a striking transformation in a child. Another saint said to have been reared by a wolf, Coningen of Mag Femin, dramatically demonstrates this. In the notes to *Féilire Óengusso* for 29 April there is an anecdote relating to Coningen. The saint's name is given a false etymology from dog, *con*, and nail, *ingen*. The explanation given

⁷⁰⁶ Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, (Anton Koberger, 1483), pp 444-45. For transmission see Heinz Meyer, *Die Enzyklopädie des Bartholomäus Anglicus: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von 'De Proprietatibus Rerum*, (Munich, 2000) and Elizabeth Keen, *The Journey of a Book: Bartholomew the Englishman and the Properties of Things*, (Canberra, 2007).

⁷⁰⁷ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children Since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. by Martin Thom, (Cambridge, 1983), p. 6.

is that the saint is said to have the nail of a wolf, which he grew after being nursed by a wolf: 'Coningen ro boi ac coin allaith quodam casu sugens lac ex uberibus eius cum catuillis [sic] suis' 'Coningen at one point sucked milk from the teats of a wolf alongside her pups'.⁷⁰⁸ No more information is given on how the saint felt about the suckling wolf and the pups with whom he ate, but others do not view it as a good thing. His bestial associations are used to explain why he is reviled by the clerics of Leinster.⁷⁰⁹ The tale gives a physical expression to the lasting effect nursing could have on a child. In this monstrous example, it is illuminating to note that fosterage terminology is eschewed. The nursing is described in literal terms, as an explanation of Coningen's unusual form. The emotional assumptions that would surround fosterage are omitted from this account of being raised by wolves.

The effect of nursing on the nature of the child is seen in the most famous example of wild fostering from the Classical world: Romulus and Remus. The Classical trope of the child abandoned in the wilderness was known to the medieval Irish as Classical texts became popular during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with translations of the Aeneid, Dares Phrygius, and the Alexander Saga.⁷¹⁰ The Middle Irish version of the Romulus and Remus myth is preserved in Trinity College Dublin manuscript 1336.⁷¹¹ It takes up but one side of a folio and appears to be a stand-alone text; that is to say it does not come as part of a larger world history.⁷¹² Once more, although the wolf nurses the two abandoned boys, no reference is made to fosterage nor is the other vocabulary of fosterage used. The text includes a variant on the wolf fostering, in which the children are fostered by a woman called Lupa. Here the

⁷⁰⁸ FO, p. 120.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid. There is a tradition, recorded in the *Martyrology of Donegal* that Coningen was a female saint of the Uí Eneclais (*The Martyrology of Donegal: A Calendar of the Saints of Ireland*, ed. by John O'Donovan et al. (Dublin, 1864), pp. 112-13). The association of women with these nurturing relationships between species is something we see in the various lives of Brigit (Cogitosus, §§ 7, 9, 18, 19, 23, 240).

⁷¹⁰ Ní Mhaonaigh, "The Metaphorical Hector", p. 140; 'Classical Compositions in Medieval Ireland: The Literary Context' in *Translations from Classical Literature: Imtheachta Aeniasa and Stair Ercuil ocus a Bás*, ed. Kevin Murray (London, 2006), pp. 1-19.

⁷¹¹ Trinity College Dublin, MS 1336 ff. 858-9.

⁷¹² 'Ceist cia cetnaroordaig missu hi tossach?', *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, III (Dublin, 1910), p. 46.

fosterage vocabulary is used. The use and omission of fosterage terminology makes fosterage appear a more human concern. The nursing provided by the wolf does have an effect on the boys, though. Her bestial nature is transferred as we saw in the case of Coningen:

Condarat srainud friu isin Tibir coruc in ben lei a da mac tarin sruth co táníc lupa chuici co ruc uaidi a maccu 7 comad hé a hamainsi 7 a gére nobeth i Romul. No issí lupa tainic ann uxor alicuius subulci 7 Faunus ainm in bucada 7 cumad hí sin Lupa atbertha hic 7 issi roalt Romul corbo mór. Co ro marb Romuil Emuilius 7 a brathair 7 a cliadmain, gurrogaib féin iarsin rigi Roman.⁷¹³

He dragged them to the Tiber so that the woman was with her two sons in the stream. Then a she-wolf came and took her sons from her and the wolf's cunning and sharpness were given to Romulus. Or the Lupa who came was the wife of some swineherd called Faunus. That Lupa brought them with her and she fostered Romulus until he was big. And Romulus killed Emuilius and his brother and his father-in-law until he himself was king of Rome.

While Ailbe's fosterage with the wolf is presented as positive, Mess Buachalla's story avoids fosterage, and Coningen and the Romulus and Remus tale express the negative consequences of such feeding. As regards the previous discussion of vocabulary used to describe wolves and dogs, it is interesting to note that the author uses the Latin *lupa* in this macaronic text. It links the wolf narrative to the one featuring a woman called Lupa but it also avoids any confusion about the nature of the canine who carries the boys off: it is a wolf. Although something of the wolf's nature is given to Romulus, to account for his killing of his family members, this is nowhere said to be fosterage. Notions about education and imparting skills and attitudes are seen in presentations of fosterage. The narratives of Coningen and Romulus and Remus play with this idea but do not explicitly refer to fosterage. This could be because of the negative traits passed on, or it could be from an understanding of fosterage as a purely human activity. In either case the narratives show us that fosterage is not the only way to describe a childhood raised by wolves. When seeking to understand what the author of Ailbe's life hoped to convey by drawing heavily on images of fosterage, we need to understand that this is a deliberate choice. That fosterage imagery is used to describe

⁷¹³ Ibid.

Ailbe's relationship to the she-wolf, means that they are connected in a much deeper fashion than in the other examples discussed in this section. Fosterage has meaning in this context.

5.4. Relationships Beyond Suckling

The major difference between Ailbe's narrative and those discussed above is how his relationship with the she-wolf continues beyond the first instance in which she saves his life. They form a bond that lasts throughout both their lives. The emotional connection that is formed and expressed is that of fosterage. The she-wolf demonstrates many of the emotions I have analysed in this thesis in her relationship with the saint. In this section I will examine Ailbe's connection to the she-wolf in the light of other life-long connections made between animals and humans. The deep connection between Ailbe and the wolf is first seen in the wolf's reaction when the child has been found by another human and taken back into civilised society. Where, in other stories of this kind, we would usually see the animal fosterer drop out of the narrative, the beginning of the transition of the child into civilised society is met with greater characterisation of the wolf.

Quadam autem die cum illa fera bestia ad querendum victum in silvis vagasset, quidam vir, nomine Lochanus filius Lugin, naturali bono perfectus, videns sub petra illa puerum inter catulos, extraxit eum, et secum ad domum suam portavit; statimque fera revertens, et puerum absentem cernens, cum magno anelitu velociter secuta est eum. Cumque Lochanus domui sue appropinquasset, fera tenuit pallium eius, et non dimisit eum donec vidit puerum. Tunc Lochanus ad feram dixit: "Vade in pace; iste puer nunquam amplius erit inter lupos, set apud me manebit". Tunc fera illa, lacrimans et rugiens, ad speluncam suam tristis reversa est.⁷¹⁴

One day when the wild beast was wandering in the woods looking for food, a certain man raised to natural goodness, called Lóchán mac Lugin saw the boy beneath the rock among the pups. He brought him out and carried him back to his home. All at once the beast came back and, seeing that the boy was away, followed him quickly, panting heavily. When Lóchán approached his house, the beast grabbed his cloak and would not let it go until she saw the boy. Then Lóchán said to the beast, "Go in peace. This boy will no longer be among the wolves but he will stay with me". Then the beast sadly returned to her cave, crying and wailing.

⁷¹⁴ VSH, I, p. 46.

The wolf shows a strikingly emotional response to the loss of her fosterling. The grief expressed at the loss of a foster-child is something seen in a later period, in Gaelic poetry of the sixteenth century.⁷¹⁵ Like these poems and mourning analysed in chapter two, this grief is expressed by invoking the different senses. The wolf tries to physically hold the farmer back and, when her entreaties fail, she cries and wails. Such non-verbal vocalisations have been seen before, tied to the experience of losing a foster-child.⁷¹⁶ In chapter two foster-mothers were seen to moan and wail as well as recite laments, on losing their fosterlings. The connection between the wolf and Ailbe is framed from the beginning as one in which the animal takes on human characteristics.

Is there some way that the wolf's actions can be described in wholly bestial terms? Her reaction most closely resembles that of the tiger as laid out in the bestiary tradition. From Antiquity the tiger was renowned for both its speed and ferocity as well as maternal instinct.⁷¹⁷ Ambrose in his *Hexameron* describes the rapid, (*velociter*), chase that the tiger gives the hunter who steals her cubs, just as the wolf here gives chase. In Ambrose's interpretation she gives chase because of her maternal nature: 'haec [natura] inमितem feram materno mollit affectu', 'maternal affection makes gentle the savagery of the beast'.⁷¹⁸ Such maternal or foster-maternal feeling could account for the wolf's characterisation. Despite these similarities, the wolf in this text differs from the tiger in a crucial factor: the tiger is put off from her chase when the hunter throws a mirror or glass globe in her path and she mistakes her reflection for the child.⁷¹⁹ In Ailbe's life, the wolf is not at all put off and needs to be shown the child before she will abandon her chase. The specular element of proof is accompanied

⁷¹⁵ Frater, 'Women of the Gaidhealtachd', pp. 67-79.

⁷¹⁶ There is an interesting parallel to be drawn between how the wolf approaches language and Derdriu's journey from bestial to human articulation in *Loinges Mac nUislenn* (Ann Dooley, 'The Heroic Word: The Reading of Early Irish Sagas', in *The Celtic Consciousness* ed. by Robert O'Driscoll (London, 1982) pp. 155-59).

⁷¹⁷ Clara Wille, 'Le Tigre dans la tradition latine du Moyen Age: textes et iconographie', *Reinardus. Yearbook of the International Reynard Society* 22 (2009-10), 176-97.

⁷¹⁸ PL 14:249-250; *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron*, trans. Savage, p. 240.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*

by Lóchán's speech, assuring her that the child will be well looked after. The awareness shown by the wolf elevates her from the bestial, represented by the tiger's reaction, to the level approaching human reason. As well as giving vent to her own emotions through vocal acts, there is an implication that she understands Lóchán's words.

A similar episode can be seen in one of the versions of the birth of Cormac mac Airt, known as *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic*. Just after the boy is born, his mother is asleep outside. While she is sleeping a wolf comes and takes the boy away and nurses him, 'da-mbert for a sinebolg in tsod'.⁷²⁰ Although the wolf suckles the child – again without the fosterage terminology here – this is not because the child has been abandoned in the wilderness. In this tale the wilderness is not opposed to civilisation as two spaces of simultaneous safety and danger but both compete to be associated with Cormac, the archetypal good king. Whatever the reason for his time with the wolves, it does change Cormac's character, initiating a long-lasting relationship with the animals. The narratives around Cormac are more redolent of fosterage than the other examples of animal nurturing examined above. After Cormac is returned to civilisation he is raised by Luigne Fer Trí for a year. His mother then takes him to the north of Ireland. The time with the wolves is one of Cormac's two fosterages, which agrees with the model of multiple fosterages established in chapter one.

The next section of *Scéla Éogain 7 Cormaic* introduces the difficulty in reconciling competing claims over a child. Such tensions were hinted at in chapter two but here the wolfish foster-family tries to reclaim the child taken from them. Their actions recall those of Ailbe's foster-mother but here their actions are more bestial and devoid of the understanding seen in Ailbe's life. While Cormac and his mother are travelling north, the wolves of Ireland come to take the boy back: 'in tan luid tar slíab n-and medón aidche do-sn-áncatar coin nÉirenn do brith a maic húadi ar écin' 'When she crossed the mountain at midnight the wolves of Ireland came to her to take her son from her by force'.⁷²¹ The boy is saved by cows who drive off the wolves. Unlike

⁷²⁰ Ó Cathasaigh, *The Heroic Biography*, pp. 121, 125. Again we have the use of *sod* 'bitch' to describe the loving wolf mother.

⁷²¹ Ibid, pp. 121, 126.

Ailbe's wolf fosterer, who has to interact with a man to be put off, the wolves here remain in the bestial sphere.

In another tale relating to Cormac, the relationship between Lugna and the wolves is reversed, Lugna becoming the hunter. This narrative is found in a note at the end of poem supposedly spoken by Cormac in the Book of Leinster. Cormac is taken by the lord of the wolves of Connacht, *tóesech cúan Connacht*, Conamail Conriucht, and then is hunted down by Lugni Fer Tri who destroys the land searching for him.⁷²² In both examples, by making one fosterer a wolf, the author is able to more fully and violently describe the competing desires for the foster-child expressed by fosterers and natal family. The competition for Cú Chulainn addressed in chapter one is a more anodyne expression of the same tensions. It is not the bestial nature of the wolves that is important, but rather they represent a foster-family who can be legitimately persecuted.

If the adults in these tales have a negative relationship with the wolves, this is not the case for Cormac himself. As his relationship with the wolves persists beyond merely feeding, he builds up a foster-sibling relationship with other pups. He is described as running with the wolves and more is made of this relationship in another version of the birth of Cormac, *Geneamuin Chormaic*. Here the boy is found playing (*ic aine*) with the pups in front of the cave. Their relationship continues as both the pups and Cormac are taken to be fostered by Lugna Fer Trí, the wolves go with Cormac to Tara, and once he achieves his kingship the wolves are given their due: 'Badar, imorro, a choin la Cormac iar tain 7 as ead fod-era in cadus mor bai le Cormac for conaib .i. dia oileamain do chonaib' 'Then his wolves (dogs?) were with Cormac after that and from then great honour was laid out by Cormac for the wolves, because of his fostering with the wolves'.⁷²³ So even though Cormac has two human fosterages, with Lugna in accordance with his mother's original plan, and as the pupil of Lugaid Mac

⁷²² *Book of Leinster, Formerly Lebar na Núachongbála*, ed. by Richard Irvine Best and others, 6 vols (Dublin, 1954-83), I, p. 115.

⁷²³ Hull, 'Geneamuin Chormac', p. 84.

Con in Tara, the wolves are treated like his foster-brothers.⁷²⁴ Cormac demonstrates the two ways that foster relationships are forged, through the nurturing by the wolf and the shared education he and the pups receive. The honour paid the wolves because of the fosterage is the honour that would normally be accorded to foster-siblings.

In this section I have investigated the ways in which the relationships between humans and animals can extend beyond initial nurturing, highlighting another similarity between these relationships and fosterage relationships. Ties of foster-brotherhood link coevals. The love and affection for their foster-parents continues throughout the life of the fosterling. In the case of Cormac, the wolves go with him to the heart of Irish kingship, Tara. When characters engage in fosterage with animals, some of the unspoken assumptions about fosterage are brought to the surface. Cormac's wolves are respected because they are seen as his foster-brothers; Ailbe's wolf foster-mother expresses the grief of a foster-mother at losing her fosterling; the wolves of Ireland form a cipher for the tensions inherent between families engaged in fosterage. Yet in each of these examples the fosterage language and imagery has been chosen for a reason. Cormac is the archetypal high-king and needs to show his mastery over the wilderness as well as civilisation. For Ailbe it is a sign of his sanctity. For us, these examples of animal fosterage highlight and express in new ways the emotions involved in the fosterage relationship. Such a relationship is marked by its apparent humanity, as the foster-mother of Ailbe demonstrates a more human than bestial understanding of the relationship. Unlike the morality tale of the tiger and other examples of nature providing a model for good human behaviour, the actions of the wolves in these texts draw the human and animal together in an affective relationship. In the next section I will address examples in which the human and natural boundaries break down.

5.5. A Permeable Boundary Between Human and Animal

⁷²⁴ Ó Cathasaigh suggests that the fosterage by Lugaid is an intrusive tradition, *The Heroic Biography*, p. 59.

We saw in the last section that the choice to frame Ailbe's relationship with the wolf as one of fosterage, brought changes to the wolf's character. She engaged in limited speech acts and behaved as more than an animal. Such blurring of distinction between human and animal is common. If we are to understand what fosterage between species means for the emotional community of fosterage, we need to address how such relationships function between the blurred lines of animal and human. For this section I will focus on the *ffianaigecht* material. It must be noted that the boundary between animal and man became increasingly mutable through the twelfth century, which also saw the rise of the Finn material.⁷²⁵

In the example of Finn mac Cumail and his hounds Bran and Sceolang the shifting boundaries of human and animal play across family relationships. The dogs are no ordinary hounds but rather Finn's cousins. The story of how they came to be born in dogs' bodies is told in a number of texts. The various versions have been gathered together in Reinhard and Hull's article, which has, in turn, been criticised by Carey.⁷²⁶ The single tale that explains the events most fully in *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, 'The Feast in the House of Conán'. In brief, Finn gives his maternal aunt Uirne in marriage to Imchad mac Fergus, king of the Dál nAraide. He, however, already had a wife who uses her magic power to turn Uirne into a dog. Although Uirne is restored to her former shape, the unborn children in her womb are not and she gives birth to two pups.

Not only is Finn related to the dogs in the maternal line but he is presented as having some say in their rearing: 'If it was permitted to me to be their father (*dámadh mé féin a n-athair*), I would prefer them as they are than them being people'.⁷²⁷ This rearing also has consequences for their physical shape, as his decision that they should remain dogs is presented at the same time as his decision about who would care for them. The bodies of the twins, in their final forms, are closely linked to their fosterage.

⁷²⁵ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, pp. 121, 146; Sara Ritchey, 'Rethinking the Twelfth-Century Discovery of Nature', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 39 (2009), 225-255.

⁷²⁶ John R. Reinhard and Vernam E. Hull, 'Bran and Sceolang', *Speculum* 11 (1936), 42-58; John Carey, 'Werewolves in Medieval Ireland', *CMCS* 44 (2002), 37-72.

⁷²⁷ *Feis Tighe Chonáin*, ed. by Maud Joynt, (Dublin, 1936), pp. 33-34.

Once again, as in other fosterage narratives, fosterage is used to diffuse tensions between children and step-mothers.⁷²⁸ Uchtgheal uses witchcraft to act out her jealousy but the difficulty is only resolved when Finn takes the children away.⁷²⁹ When Finn takes charge of the children, there is striking use of 'father', *athair*, to describe the power relationship. The metaphor used is more directly biological, but the importance of maternal kin is a central feature of fosterage. The children are never returned to their human form, since they were never humans to begin with. In the oldest version of the story the children cannot be transformed back because they were not struck with the metamorphosing wand in the first place.⁷³⁰ Since they were never humans outside the womb, they have never been human, and can never become human. Yet there exists a close emotional bond between Finn and Bran and Sceolang, which plays on their blood relationship as well as the quasi-fosterage relationship. Heightened emotion is seen most clearly at death, as we have noted for foster-mothers in chapter two. In the poem *Seilg Ghleanna Smoil* all the dogs of the *fían* go missing in the hunt, save Bran alone:

Níos bhfada go bhfacamar chógainn san ngleann,
Bran a's í suaidhte sárúighthe fliuch;
a's ar dteacht di d'ár láthair,
dar do láimh ba thruagh a cruth.

It was not long before we saw coming
towards us in the glen,
Bran, tired, weary and wet,
And on her coming into our presence,
By your hand, her appearance was
pitiful.

Do luid sí síos a bhfiadhnaise Fhinn,
do ghoil go fuigheach, a's do sgread go truaigh;⁷³¹

She lay down before Finn,
Crying bitterly and howling pitifully.

Finn and *fían* are grieved at the loss of their dogs, as Bran feels the loss of her sibling. The emotions of the animal are validated by their communicating them with humans. Finn, too, demonstrates his emotional tie to the hounds in *Tuarasgabhail Chatha*

⁷²⁸ We saw this at work with Findchú and the tension between Mongfind and Cairenn.

⁷²⁹ The jealousy enacted through transformative witchcraft is also seen in Fuamnach's work in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 153).

⁷³⁰ NLI MS G 4, col. 999. 'nir-fedog in da chuilen do chur asa richt con óir nach iad do-buailed' 'it was not possible to change the two whelps out of their canine form, since they had not been struck'.

⁷³¹ John O'Daly, 'Seilg Ghleanna an Smoil', *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* 6 (1858), 74-87.

Gabhra; in the aftermath of the battle Finn only cries for Bran and his grandson Oscar.⁷³² The bond between Finn and Bran has been made more important than the bond which usually exists between maternal cousins.

Fosterage and animals are also combined in an unusual episode in *Acallam na Senórach*, The Battle of Tracht Rudraige, in which animal imagery is used to describe Finn's relationship with the sons of the king of Connacht. They are dearly beloved of the *fian* and are described as 'young, beardless boys' although they are not explicitly called Finn's fosterlings.⁷³³ The paternal devotion to them is reinforced when Cáilte says that they would prove worthy sons, *mac dingbala*, for either Cormac or Finn.⁷³⁴ The association with the king of Ireland and the leader of the *fian* is clearly meant to reflect well on the boys, but the terms used recall their youth and places Finn in a pseudo-paternal role. The two boys are guarding the shore when they are attacked by the sons of the king of Lochlann, Conus and Conmael.⁷³⁵ At the same time, Finn has a dream: 'Ocus is sí-sin áis & uair at-chonnairc Find fis & aislingthi & iss ed at-chonnairc, da ron glasa ac díul a da chich' 'And that was the hour and time that Finn had a dream and a vision, and this is what he saw, two grey seals suckling at his two breasts'.⁷³⁶ The dream is interpreted by Fergus Fínbél as a sign of the boys' impending doom.

Unlike the other examples used in this chapter it must be remembered that this is a dream, not a physical fosterage. The fact that boys are imagined as animals has precedents in other dreams recounted in medieval Irish literature, for example the dream of Mongfinn has about the relative prominence her sons will have in the kingship of Ireland.⁷³⁷ Although there is no hint of fosterage here the children are seen as animals, as dogs in this prophetic dream. Such visions are not restricted to Irish literature as dreams concerning children often use animals to represent children and

⁷³² *The Battle of Gabhra: Garristown in the county of Dublin, fought A.D. 283*, ed. by Nicholas O'Kearney (Dublin, 1853), p. 131.

⁷³³ AnS, p. 90.

⁷³⁴ AnS, p. 88.

⁷³⁵ It is interesting to note this example of dog names associated with the *fian*. I will address these associations later on.

⁷³⁶ AnS, p. 89.

⁷³⁷ Stokes, 'The Death of Crimthann', p. 175.

offspring.⁷³⁸ The choice to present the premonition about the sons of the king of Connacht in terms of wild animals suckling at Finn's breasts, demonstrates the *fíán*'s close connection to nature and Finn's affectionate, foster relationship with boys, through the allusive medium of dream vision.

The following interpretation is tentative, since such dream visions are deliberately obscure. However, the striking animal form and breast suckling merit attention. The two seals take the place of the two boys, but since seals do not feature heavily in the bestiary tradition, or in other dream narratives, this choice is hard to interpret. The image of Finn suckling the seals does not have any reality – unlike the male lactation examined in chapter four and the other animal fosterage relationships discussed here – but this metaphor says something about Finn's relationship to the boys. The nutritive and obedient imagery indicates to Fergus, the dream's interpreter, the demise of the boys in Finn's care. In the discussion of *Ísucán* we saw that *díul* can express the more negative aspect of suckling. The verb here is working in a similar way, invoking the proximity and care that Finn would have for his charges, while hinting at the fate that is to befall them. The intimate relationship between Finn and his charges, at the moment they die heroically as a result of a conflict instigated by Finn, is presented in bodily, animal terms.⁷³⁹ In this case how dear (*inmain*) the boys are to Finn is expressed through his suckling.⁷⁴⁰

The seals form part of an imaginative world of referents that can easily slip between human and animal. We have noted the ease with which Finn accepts his dog cousins. There are other tales relating to the *fíán* in which the boundary between human and animal is not as clear as one would expect. The mother of Finn's son Oisín comes to Finn as a deer 'so that Oisín [lit. little deer] was thus conceived by Bláí Derg

⁷³⁸ For example, Childe's vision of degenerating generation is seen through degenerating animals, in Jesse Keskiö, *Dreams and Visions in the Early Middle Ages: Reception and Use of Patristic Ideas, 400-900* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 53-4.

⁷³⁹ AnS, p. 89.

⁷⁴⁰ AnS, p. 88.

in the form of a hind'.⁷⁴¹ Aside from these more concrete examples it is often noted that the *fíán* share some kinship, if only in name, with wolves. Examples of this kind have been collected by McCone and although his interpretation of the material as directly referring to werewolves has been challenged by Carey, the connection with wolves and dogs is clear.⁷⁴² What is especially striking in terms of fosterage is the connection between naming practices and dogs. As McCone has said about the prominence of *Cú* names for *fíán* members: 'Since initiations commonly involve naming processes, the acquisitions of such names, subsequently retained throughout adult life, upon entry into the *fíán* would be a plausible starting point'.⁷⁴³ We have seen how name change can mark the beginning of foster relationships.

The *fíán* provides us with a fertile space in which to examine the human and animal boundary, as it relates to fosterage. Time in the *fíán* is time spent in a liminal state. Such a state comes from the unbounded wilderness, from the new bonds that are forged in this space, and from the period of growth it covers. As the youths interact with the uncivilised wilderness they are also growing up, changing from youths into the adults who form settled society. MacLehose has pointed out the contradictions that lay at the heart of twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries ideas of the child: 'The child was the model of innocence and humility, and the child was a sinful creature in need of cleansing'.⁷⁴⁴ Although the sin needs cleansing in this case is original sin, the figure of the child can represent more active sin, since they are quick to anger and appetitive.⁷⁴⁵ The tension between unthinking goodness and unaware slavery to bodily desire can also be seen in the animal world, in the devotion of the dog and the rapaciousness of the wolf. Slipping between human and animal is, for the members of the *fíán* viewed in the same way as changing from a child to a man. Both states are

⁷⁴¹ *The Book of Leinster*, ed. Best and others, p. 670 'co ndernad Ossine de/ri Blai nDeirgg i rricht eile'. See a discussion in Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, pp. 95-98.

⁷⁴² McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fíana*', pp. 1-22; Carey, 'Werewolves in Medieval Ireland', pp. 37-72.

⁷⁴³ McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fíana*', p. 16

⁷⁴⁴ MacLehose, *A Tender Age*, p. 59.

⁷⁴⁵ Dzon, 'Boys Will Be Boys', pp. 184-85.

similar and both evoke the ambivalent attitude towards the *ffian* in medieval Irish literature.⁷⁴⁶ As the warriors move through the *ffian* they shed their animal and childhood natures. The confluence of these ideas is a reason why animals are used as ciphers for children in dreams and how it would seem appropriate for animals to foster children, or be fostered themselves, in such a milieu. As we have seen throughout the thesis fosterage terminology can be used as more than a metaphor, to describe relationships that have a certain emotional tenor, that express obligations and shared experience. The flexible boundaries between human and animal allows for some cases in which humans and animals can act as fosterers to one another.

5.6. Filial Piety and Becoming Human

Similar to other foster relationships, the relationships between humans and animals persist throughout life. We saw this in Finn's relationship with his dog cousins and in the case of Ailbe and the wolf. In fact, the relationship between Ailbe and the wolf lasts into old age, as one would expect of fosterage. In this expression of the fosterage bond, we can see that fosterage has had the effect of making the wolf much more human – something we saw beginning when the boy was taken from her. In this final section I will analyse how the wolf's actions fit into the model of fosterage. Although no contracts have been exchanged, the protection, food, and love that the wolf showed early in the life has create a fosterage bond. Her love is repaid in this final section when Ailbe saves her and her children.⁷⁴⁷ The following passage comes from the end of the life of Ailbe:

Quodam tempore homines illius regionis, id est Arath, cum suo duce venacionem fecerunt, ut lupos a finibus suis repellerent. Una autem lupa direxit cursum suum ad locum in quo erat Albeus; et, sequentibus eam equitibus, posuit capud suum in sinu sancti Albei. Albeus vero dixit ei: "Ne timeas; quia non solum tu liberaberis, set catuli tui venient ad te incolumes". Et ite

⁷⁴⁶ Richard Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin *Laicus*, Irish *Láech* and the Devil's Men', *Ériu* 30 (1979), 75-92.

⁷⁴⁷ This salvific fosterage is seen for Níall Noigiallach, in Colam Ela's life, in the actions of Buí and in early life of Finn to name but four examples.

factum est. Et ait Albeus: "Ego apud vos nutritus sum in infancia; et bene fecisti, quia in senectute mea venisti ad me. Nam ante me cotidie ad mensam panem commedetis, et nemo nocebit vobis". Ita lupi cotidie veniebant ad sanctum Albeum, et commedebant ante eum; et postea revertebantur ad loca sua. Et nemo nocebat illis; nec ipsi nocebant alicui.⁷⁴⁸

One day the men of that region, that is Araid, were on a hunt with their lord to drive the wolves from their lands. However, a she-wolf directed her course to the place Ailbe was. She placed her head in the lap of saint Ailbe, when the horsemen were following her. Ailbe then said, "Do not be afraid, since not only will you be freed but your pups will come to you unharmed". Thus it happened. Ailbe said, "I was fostered with you in my infancy. You did well, since you came to me in my old age. For every day you will eat bread at a table in front of me and no one will harm you". The wolves came every day to saint Ailbe and they ate in front of him. Afterwards they went back to their place. No one harmed them, nor did they harm anyone.

The safety that the wolf seeks in her old age draws directly on the foster relationship established between her and the saint. The justification is similar to the phrases used to describe the son's duties towards his mother and foster-mother in *Cáin Lánamna*: 'This is the relationship that exists from the son for her i.e. provisioning against poverty and care in old age'.⁷⁴⁹ The phrasing is the same for the duties to a foster-mother as the duties to a mother. Given the context of the wolf's actions, the duty invoked is that due to a foster-mother: the care and nourishment given at a young age are expected to be repaid later on.

The idea of protection is created through gestural language. The wolf puts her head in the lap of the saint in order to indicate her desire for protection. We have seen in an earlier chapter that saints can take the Christ Child onto their laps in a representation of the fostering act. Although the image is reversed, the wolf uses the placement of bodies in order to make Ailbe aware of their foster relationship and his duties towards her. Her actions here articulate the desire for communication in the same way as the vocalisations analysed above. The wolf is using the symbolic gestural language that we commonly see in this period.⁷⁵⁰ If the wild beast can use language, even if it is non-verbal, then the wolf calls into question the assumption that she, as animal, is unreasoning and lacks the capacity for language. The primacy of reason as the differentiating factor between man and beast is summed up in the words of

⁷⁴⁸ VSH, I, pp. 62-3.

⁷⁴⁹ *Cáin Lánamna*, ed. Eska, p. 95.

⁷⁵⁰ Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990).

Augustine in *De genesi ad litteram* 'ut videlicet intelligamus in eo factum hominem ad imaginem Dei, in quo irrationalibus animantibus antecellit. Id autem est ipsa ratio, vel mens, vel intelligentia, vel si quo alio vocabulo commodius appellatur'.⁷⁵¹ The connection between this and language is often demonstrated in descriptions of Adam naming the animals.

The image of the animal with its head in its master's lap is seen elsewhere. In this chapter I have discussed Bran, returning from the disastrous hunt at Glenn Smoil, lying down piteously at the feet of his master and relative. This gesture is not as clear as the one the she-wolf performs and may be motivated more by his animal instincts than an attempt at human communication. Yet, Bran is a dog and as such has a pre-existing relationship with man in the mind of contemporary medieval society. Such gestural language is found in actions of Liath Macha, Cú Chulainn's horse.⁷⁵² The fact that Bran was supposed to have been born a human need not necessarily be in play here. The wild nature of the wolf makes her attempts at communication all the more striking. Although there is no textual connection between the two tales, a similar principle is at work in Marie de France's *lais*, *Bisclavret*. In this text the hero is a werewolf and when he approaches the king's hunting party in the form of a wolf, the king articulates the conclusions that I have drawn here. When the man in a wolf's body comes and licks his foot he says: "'Lords", he said "come here! Look at this marvel, how this beast is humbling himself! He has the mind of a man, he cries for mercy'.⁷⁵³ I would not wish to imply any connections between the texts but both occur against a similar mental back drop which would view such communicative actions from a wild beast as miraculous.

⁷⁵¹ *De Genesi ad Litteram*, ed. by Joseph Zycha, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 28 (Vienna, 1894).

⁷⁵² *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, ed. Kimpton, pp. 14, 37. Liath Macha was the horse born at the same time as Cú Chulainn, the coeval nature of the two linking them in a foster-like sense. Domestic animals can be referred to in fosterage terms both in Irish and other languages. For example, Hrafnkel calls his horse Freyfaxi 'fóstri minn' (*Austfirðingsögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhanesson (Reykjavik, 1940), p. 104).

⁷⁵³ *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. by Jean Rychner (Paris, 1966), p. 66.

It is tempting to view the wolf's position, in the bosom of the saint, as invoking the fosterage imagery we have examined in many places in this thesis, in which the bosom is used as the site of creation of the fosterage bond. In Ailbe's life it is not the lactating breast, *cích*, but the gender neutral, *sinu*, and, *ucht*. Yet in all the cases previously examined, the foster-child is the one who places their head on the lap of the fosterer. In the case of Ailbe and the wolf the foster relationship has been reversed. Ailbe is the foster-son but takes his foster-mother onto his lap. In this way Ailbe fulfils the reciprocal duty of the foster relationship: in a total inversion of fostering duties, as once the she-wolf protected and fed Ailbe, so he protects and feeds her now.

Yet, Ailbe's role as abbot must not be overlooked. As the abbatial father figure, he not only saves the wolf from her earthly death, but there is a sense in which Ailbe redeems her bestial nature. For the wolves this redemption comes when they abandon their rapacious ways and are fed on bread by Ailbe. The image of a saint redeeming wolves is not unique to Ailbe and his foster relationship. Molua, notably, domesticates wolves after they come seeking food from him.⁷⁵⁴ Furthermore, we can see animals taking on human roles in the monastery, as in the example of Cíarán and his fox, wolf, badger, and boar monks.⁷⁵⁵ Animals can play a part in the religious life. While some images highlight the sanctity of the saint, as in Francis preaching to the birds, I suggest that the Irish examples demonstrate, not only nature's ability to recognise the saint, but also to express more agency on the part of the animals. The gestural language employed by the wolf upon seeking Ailbe's aid, is mirrored in Suibne's actions at the end of the Middle Irish tale *Buile Suibhne*.⁷⁵⁶ Here the man who has been made beast, is reintegrated into society by interacting with a saint, Moling. In all this we can posit a slipping between animal and human identities, although it is only in Ailbe's case that his foster relationship plays an important role in the interaction. The force of the fosterage relationship is to draw Ailbe and the wolf together, a communion that is based on the human rather than animal. Nature is shown to be amenable to the saint

⁷⁵⁴ VSH, II, pp. 217-18

⁷⁵⁵ BNE, I, pp. 104, 113.

⁷⁵⁶ *Buile Shuibhne*, ed. by James George O'Keefe (Dublin, 1931), p. 77.

through its participation in fosterage. The creation of a relationship in this way is very human but in some instances available to animals. The bond is founded on love shared between fosterling and fosterer.

5.7. Conclusion

Animals appear to partake in fosterage relationships, but not universally. We have examined a number of examples of humans reared by animals that do not use the fosterage metaphor. When it is deployed it is an active choice to describe a particular relationship. Fosterage describes an emotional connection, made through nurturing and persisting through the lives of the participants. The emotional community I have described earlier in the thesis is employed here to understand, fully, what is meant by framing Ailbe's relationship with the wolf as a fosterage one. A love is created between the two, enacted when the wolf tries to stop Lóchán taking the boy away and when Ailbe protects his foster-mother from the hunters. Both are ennobled by their association. Through an examination of the emotions of fosterage as described in a human/animal relationship, we can see that some of the implicit assumptions about fosterage are made explicit.

The paradox of the wilderness providing protection from the dangerous home is a common one, but one that speaks particularly to fosterage. We saw in the Introduction that in the Triads of Ireland fosterage is described as one of the three 'dark things', *dorcha*.⁷⁵⁷ The uncertainty expressed in the passage can extend to the feelings of the child who is sent away into the metaphoric wilderness of another family. Cú Chulainn has to journey far across dangerous terrain to train with Scáthach, literally the shadowy one. Yet, as we have seen throughout the thesis, the home environment can be more dangerous, as step-mothers and lords can harbour murderous intentions towards new-

⁷⁵⁷ *Triads*, ed. Meyer, pp. 32-3.

borns. Such a reading of the wilderness is tentative but highlights how we can access past emotions through close literary analysis.

The medieval Irish are often portrayed as bestial and having an affinity with beasts. It has often been noted that the language of conquest, particularly in the mouth of Gerald of Wales, insists on the bestial nature of the native Irish.⁷⁵⁸ Not only are naked men, covered in their own hair, found in a coracle off the west coast but Gerald also preserves one of the most famous tales of lycanthropy from this period, in which a priest gives last rites to the werewolves of Ossory.⁷⁵⁹ In analysing the Old French lay *Melion*, Boyd has concluded that Ireland was a natural setting for werewolves.⁷⁶⁰ These anecdotes are designed to show the Irish in a bestial light. Yet the *Vita Sancti Albei* and the other examples analysed in this chapter have shown that the connections created between humans and animals can be presented positively, redounding well on both the participants. The animals in these examples show love and care that the children cannot find in their human homes and as a result of this care, the animals are raised to human levels of understanding. These interactions are not always characterised by fosterage but where they are, the notions of reciprocal duty and love, that have been demonstrated within fosterage throughout this thesis, are used to full effect.

In all the foregoing, the emotional community created between animals and humans through fosterage is the same as that created between humans. Fosterage is the power that unites those who do not share a blood link, even to the extent of being of different species. Fosterage is a powerful force for creating such emotional ties. Beyond this, fosterage is a transformative force. It removes sin, as we have seen in the examples of Colmán Ela and Buí, and in this chapter it makes animals more human. Once again, fosterage is used by medieval Irish writers as more than a metaphor to accurately

⁷⁵⁸ Rhonda Knight, 'Werewolves, Monsters, and Miracles: Representing Colonial Fantasies in Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hibernica*', *Studies in Iconography* 22 (2001), 55-86.

⁷⁵⁹ *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. O'Meara, pp. 110-111 and pp. 69-72.

⁷⁶⁰ Matthieu Boyd, 'Melion and the Wolves of Ireland', *Neophilologus* 93 (2009), 555-70.

describe deep emotional bonds, formed at the breast through shared experience, bonds which last throughout the participants' lives.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

As Charles-Edwards has said ‘fosterage belonged more to the emotional sphere, less to the material, than did natural parenthood’.⁷⁶¹ In this thesis I have examined how that emotional sphere was presented and what it meant for foster families to belong to it more than natural parenthood. A picture has emerged of fosterage created by emotional, nutritive and educational ties. Fosterage was a means to understand relationships created outside the natal family, at a young age, reinforced by shared experience. These bonds lasted throughout the lives of those involved. Yet, many of the examples of fosterage I have examined fall outside the medieval Irish legal definition of fosterage. The picture of the emotional community I have created is slightly different from that created in the law texts. The narrative texts show us a fosterage based on affection, an *altram serce* if you will, that still affects how relationships function, even if the fosterage is not legally recognised.⁷⁶² In these instances the foster relationship is distinct, it is not friendship or a teacher/pupil relationship, but has a different emotional tenor. Fictive kin bonds are created in this emotional sphere. For this reason, we see fosterage describing relationships among the *ffian*, between saints and the divine, and even between humans and wolves. Each chapter of this thesis has addressed a different question in relation to the foster-family and the emotional community that it creates.

Before we can create a history of the emotions of fosterage, we must resolve a tricky definitional problem. Previous social histories of this kind have focused on the emotions displayed within the family.⁷⁶³ The relationships within a family are easier to

⁷⁶¹ Charles-Edwards, *Irish and Welsh Kinship*, p. 81.

⁷⁶² For information on *altram serce* see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 87; CIH 1764.29.

⁷⁶³ John W. Scott, ‘The History of the Family as an Affective Unit’, *Social History* 4 (1979), 509-16.

define, who is a father and mother has something of a biological necessity about it. Fosterage falls into the penumbra of fictive kinship, along with sworn-brother, step-family, and spiritual kin. Before we can outline the emotional ties within this unit, we need to define who forms part of the foster-family. Related work on the social history of medieval Ireland has been dominated by recourse to the law texts and with good reason: this is an extensive body of material, composed in Old Irish with later glosses and commentaries.⁷⁶⁴ Yet, even with this abundance of sources foster-families are not so easily defined, and to create a full picture, we need to account for the emotional ties of fosterage, as depicted in narrative texts.

The novelty of this project, in terms of the history of emotions, is twofold. Firstly, even though we are experiencing what some have called the “emotional turn” in the study of history, medieval Ireland has been conspicuously absent.⁷⁶⁵ The reasons for this absence are not for me to describe, at this stage, but it is fair to say that Ireland is often overlooked in the larger historiography of the medieval world. My thesis brings the fosterage community into the discussion of the history of emotions, where before it has been viewed legally or anthropologically. Secondly, the role of foster family, as falling outside of the natal family but acting as a parallel to it, allows us to trace the emotional contours of an area of society usually omitted from histories of emotions.⁷⁶⁶ Larrington examined foster-sibling relationships as part of siblinghood in the Middle Ages, but it is important to view the foster family in its own right, not as a variation on the natal family.⁷⁶⁷ To this end, I employ a slightly altered version of Rosenwein’s notion of emotional communities. The emotional communities of fosterage are at the same time both smaller and larger than the communities she describes. They are smaller than Rosenwein’s communities, as I address families and sometimes only the relationship between two people. At the same time they are larger, as each expression

⁷⁶⁴ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 225-26.

⁷⁶⁵ Nicole Eustace and others, ‘AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions’, *American Historical Review* 117 (2012), 1487-1531: p. 1487.

⁷⁶⁶ Scott, ‘The History of the Family’, pp. 509-16.

⁷⁶⁷ Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters*, pp. 42-4, 208-34.

of emotions within the foster-family partakes of the model of fosterage as widely understood in medieval Irish society and as expressed in the texts under consideration.

The foundation of the fosterage relationship, in the model I have presented, combines elements of the nutritive and educative. Nutrition and education are rarely seen separately but each can play a more or less important role in defining the relationship. While the scholarly consensus has been that fosterage could begin while the child was still nursing, the response in the secondary literature has been somewhat lacklustre. Current publications still state that it should begin at seven. We have seen that the influence of oblation and monastic education has associated fosterage with the age of seven when applied to religious communities. Much of the importance attached to the age of seven arises from its position in canon law and, indeed, in native Irish law.⁷⁶⁸ Yet such an age restriction has no power at the secular level. The importance of nursing as part of the fosterage bond needs to be recognised and has not yet been fully appreciated. Throughout this work I have noted how nutritive and educative fosterage work side by side as contributing factors to the representation of emotional connections within the foster-family.

My attempt to recreate aspects of the emotional community of fosterage is a task that will not produce a neat answer. Yet, I hope that the conclusions reached in this thesis will also prove useful for considering fosterage in other cultures of North-Western Europe. We have seen in the Introduction that fosterage forms a part of child-rearing in other cultures, although not as a central a part as it does in medieval Ireland. For medieval Ireland, I have described in detail, through the insight provided by each chapter's case study, the emotional web that underpinned fosterage and how these emotions were expressed, both within the foster-family and as a means of explaining other social relationships. In the following section I will draw out the conclusions of each of these case studies.

⁷⁶⁸ René Metz, 'L'Enfant dans le droit canonique: orientations de recherches', *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin* 36 (1976), 10-96. The age of seven is also connected with the age of discretion in Irish law, see Ní Chonaill, 'Child-centred Law', pp. 7-8 and CIH 1265.4.

6.2 Drawing the Chapters Together

There exists a vast number of texts both in Latin and Irish which in some way address the bonds of fosterage. The methodological approach has been to take an individual case study or research question as the focus of each chapter and from them create a representative model of the emotional community of fosterage. This selective focus will naturally come at the expense of taking a comprehensive view. A fully comprehensive view is impossible given the survival, or otherwise, of our sources, but even within the surviving tales I have not touched on every example of fosterage. I will use this section to outline the conclusions drawn from each chapter and to place them in conversation with one another, to give a fuller account of the emotional community of fosterage so created. Although each chapter has addressed a separate question or case study, they are not discrete units. The emotional community of fosterage is marked by its interconnected nature, connected both to other members of the foster-family and to the social expectations encoded in the literature.

The first chapter took as its case study the multiple fosterage of Cú Chulainn. The chapter interrogates how representative is the story of multiple fosterage, as told in *Compert Con Culainn* and *Tochmarc Emire*.⁷⁶⁹ The narrative accepted in modern scholarship, is that the more foster-fathers a child had, the higher his status. The chapter also analyses how foster-fathers relate to their charges, through the duty of care, which extended from fosterage into the later life of the fosterling. Furthermore, the emotional bonds created between foster-father and foster-son – as the texts are overwhelmingly concerned with male relationships – were, in the first instance, based on the education provided by the foster-father. This is seen in the special training Conall Gulbain received and the skills that the Ulstermen boasted of imparting to Cú Chulainn.⁷⁷⁰ Education is one of the central responsibilities of a fosterer in the law texts;

⁷⁶⁹ CCC, pp. 1-15; CCC, pp. 16-68.

⁷⁷⁰ Lehmacher, 'Eachtra Conaill Gulbain', p. 221; FTB, p. 503.

when we examine the narrative literature, education forms the underlying bond on which the emotional connections between foster-fathers and fosterlings, are based.

However, in closely examining these texts from the Ulster Cycle and placing them alongside other narratives of multiple fosterage, we see a picture that contrasts with that proposed in the secondary literature. Instead of many different fosterers, when multiple fosterage is used, the texts only mention two or, very rarely, three. In these cases, one foster-family, in the guise of the foster-father, bears the emotionally resonant bond. Cú Chulainn complicates this picture by having different foster-families in different tales, which cannot be taken as a coherent whole. The analysis in chapter one also introduces some of the difficulties in working with the intertextual nature of medieval Irish literature. The previous image of Cú Chulainn's multiple fosterage was created by combining texts. I am creating the picture of the emotional community of fosterage by combining the evidence of many texts; yet, by remaining aware that each text must be properly contextualised, I will avoid the pitfalls of previous work.

The emotions discussed in this chapter are those that arise from the bonds and tensions of multiple fosterage. More foster-families introduce more – and sometimes competing – ties of affection. However, the texts show that a strong emotional bond is made with one foster-family. Although he appears to have many foster-fathers, in each narrative in which Cú Chulainn appears, we are presented with one main foster-father, Amorgen, Fergus, or Conchobur. The emotional means by which fosterage bonds can be formed, allows for the character of foster-father to change, without there being a legal precedent. The overwhelmingly male focus is troubled by Cú Chulainn's relationship with the virago Scáthach. She acts as a male educator, imparting the art of war to her fosterlings, but when Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn recall their time in Alba, Scáthach is presented as a tender foster-mother.⁷⁷¹ When Scáthach appears in the text, she is a troublesome figure, a woman teaching the male arts of war; when she is recalled in the text her troublesome nature is returned to the traditional tenderness (*máeth*)

⁷⁷¹ TBC 1, pp. 93-4; TBC LL, p. 95.

expected of a foster-mother. There is much tenderness in all foster-family relationships, as seen in chapter two, when the feminine role of mourner is adopted by all members of the foster-family.

The untimely death of a child, or indeed any death, calls out emotional ties as part of the response to such a point of crisis. What may have been invisible and unsaid is made explicit at such times. The reactions of foster-mothers to the death of their fosterlings demonstrates the continued care and long-lasting emotional ties that fosterage created. Although the act of mourning is considered particularly feminine, foster-mothers are often accompanied by male members of the foster-family. The foster-mother can be the most appropriate figure to mourn the passing of the fosterling and the choice of an author or redactor to make the foster-mother the principal mourner can place this role in conflict with the natal family. The act of mourning is a final act of creation, of recalling the life of the deceased in order to fix it in collective memory. The deceased is moved out of the domestic sphere, into the wider social one. The death is most dramatically reified when it prompts changes of name in the landscape. The *Dindsenchas* material is replete with such examples, even of the mourners themselves dying and becoming part of the landscape.⁷⁷² As with the evidence of who gets to mourn, the foster-family were not always the ones who die of grief and fix deaths in the landscape. That they are considered the most appropriate choice in some situations is illuminating, though. The foster-mother can bear the burden of recalling the dead, as they were the defining presence in the early life of the child.

Recalling the past also allows the foster-mothers to act as guardians of memory, altering how the past should be remembered and giving access to those who seek it. This is the role of Cáma, the foster-mother of the *ffian*, who recalls the lost past for Caílte and Oisín at the beginning of the *Acallam*.⁷⁷³ The role of tutelary foster-mother to a whole body of people moves the foster-mother from the specific family into the

⁷⁷² Joanna Huckins MacGugan, 'Landscape and Lamentation: Constructing Commemorated Space in Three Middle Irish Texts', *PRIA* 112 C (2012), 189-217.

⁷⁷³ *AnS*, pp. 1-2.

realm of the universal. The tutelary role of foster-mothers is interesting to contrast with the tutelary mother figure. The Virgin Mary is a universal mother, as is Anu the mother of the gods (*mater deorum Hibernensium*), according to *Sanas Cormaic*.⁷⁷⁴ Once more there is considerable overlap between the role of mother and foster-mother.

The expanded use of fosterage terminology is addressed in chapter three when trying to discern what makes a foster-sibling. In many of the texts, especially those of the *ffianaigecht*, we can see that many characters are called foster-brother when they are not, at least in the legal definition of the term.⁷⁷⁵ In these instances we can see the clearest need for a new, emotional basis on which to understand fosterage. There are many examples of fosterage in medieval Irish literature that do not have a legal basis. For example, Medb's fostering of Cormac caused Toner some interpretive difficulty: 'Thus, although she [Medb] may not technically have been Cormac's foster-mother, she has acted like a foster-mother, and so may claim the status of a foster-parent'.⁷⁷⁶ I argue that she is Cormac's foster-mother because she has fed and cared for him. This fosterage was based on an emotional and nurturing foundation, rather than a legal one.

Similar terminological shifts are seen when foster-brothers are called foster-fathers, the alterations in terminology subtly demarcating the shifts in hierarchies between foster-siblings in the highly stratified society of medieval Ireland. Foster-sisters appear in this discussion but the sexes are often segregated. It may be worth pointing out, at this point, that sexual relationships between members of a foster-family are very rare. Where such relationships occur in the annals they are not looked on favourably.⁷⁷⁷ Although fosterage terminology is not restricted to those in legal foster relationships, the slippage of the terminology was not an arbitrary choice. Fosterage represented a particular type of relationship, based on an emotional bond

⁷⁷⁴ 'Sanas Cormaic' ed. Meyer, p. 3, 11.

⁷⁷⁵ Such an impression is often missed from translation, which emend the terminology to produce more apparently logical foster relationships. This flattening of the nuance of the Irish use of foster terminology makes it harder to accurately understand the relationships.

⁷⁷⁶ *Bruiden Da Choca*, ed. Toner, p. 9.

⁷⁷⁷ AU, p. 168.

formed by shared nurturing and shared education. When such bonds were formed without the legal apparatus of *altram iarraithe*, fosterage of a fee, they were still understood as fosterage.

Relationships that are not fosterage ones, in the strict legal sense, can still be presented through fosterage vocabulary and were still thought of as fosterage. In chapter four, I sought to understand the foster relationship to the Christ Child. This is clearly presented in the tenth-century poem *Ísucán*, preserved in the twelfth-century notes to *Féilire Óengusso*, a metrical calendar of saints with later explanatory notes.⁷⁷⁸ In order to understand the aspect of medieval Irish spirituality represented by the fosterage imagery in *Ísucán*, we have to understand how fosterage worked in a religious setting. I have outlined how monastic fosterage differed from oblation and secular fosterage, while still remaining in dialogue with those two practices. Unlike oblation, the child was not offered to God, nor was the act irreversible. The focus of monastic fosterage was still the emotional bond between fosterer and fosterling. Saints were able to relate to the divine through fosterage: Íte, Moling, Adomnán, Ethne, and Sodelb all fostered the Christ Child.⁷⁷⁹ Fosterage was an accessible metaphor as religious could foster other children in their own communities. In this way fostering the Christ Child could appear early in medieval Irish spirituality since this metaphor was more applicable than spiritual motherhood. In many saints' lives children appear in religious settings. The saints themselves enter the religious life as young children and take on charges of their own in turn. This was not the same as secular fosterage, however. The concern over the nutritive element of fosterage manifested itself in the miraculous lactation of some male saints, while other tales indicate that religious fosterage began later in the child's life. In all of this, the relationships so created were still emotionally deep, lasting through the lives of the saints.

The final chapter takes fosterage outside the human realm, something seen in the story of Íte and the beetle examined in chapter four. Besides investigating

⁷⁷⁸ FO, pp. 42-44.

⁷⁷⁹ FO, pp. 42-44; *Life of Moling*, ed. Stokes, p. 30-32; *Betha Adamnáin*, ed. Herbert and Ó Riain, pp. 58-9; FO, p. 102.

human/animal relationships this chapter draws together the themes and insights gained throughout the thesis. Despite the blurred boundaries between humans and animals in the Middle Ages, framing their relationship in terms of fosterage is relatively uncommon. This makes the figures of Ailbe and his wolf foster-mother a useful case study.⁷⁸⁰ As we have seen throughout the thesis, the emotional ties of fosterage can be created without recourse to legal action. Feeding, warming and caring for a child who is not one's own, is enough to have that relationship presented as fosterage. Such relationships represent the emotional fosterage that is hidden from an approach to the practice based solely on the legal material. These fosterage bonds are still ones of long-lasting affection and loyalty. The relationship is fosterage, embodied and formed in physical space, even if it does not have a legal aspect. In chapter two we saw the foster bonds lasting until death; so too Ailbe protects his foster-mother and she returns to the narrative at the end of the *vita*, thus fulfilling the role of the foster-mother, to bookend the fosterling's life. Cormac, too, keeps his foster-brother wolves with him when he takes the kingship of Tara. The animal fostering functions alongside other foster relationships, as Ailbe is taken in by the woodsman Lóchán. The closer relationship between Ailbe and the wolf follows the model of multiple fosterage laid out in chapter one, as his deepest connection is to her and not Lóchán.

In order to fully appreciate the force of referring to the wolf as Ailbe's foster-mother, we must fully understand the emotional community they are being placed in. When this emotional fosterage is invoked, it is done so in a way that recalls the other foster relationships described throughout medieval Irish literature. This project can aid as a background against which to read many other instances of fosterage not examined here and place them in the emotional community of fosterage.⁷⁸¹ Throughout this thesis I have elaborated the emotional ties involved in fosterage, the love, duty, care,

⁷⁸⁰ VSH, I, pp. 46-64.

⁷⁸¹ It would be almost impossible to give a full account of how much material I have not addressed from the surviving body of medieval Irish literature, both narrative and religious, written in Latin and the vernacular. Although slightly dated one of the best overviews of the material is John E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, trans. by Patrick K. Ford, 2nd edn, (Cardiff, 1992).

and tensions that it brought out. In the next section I shall address, alongside other methodological concerns, how it sits within the history of emotions.

6.3 Revisiting Methodology

In this section I wish to discuss some of the problems encountered in this study and address potential criticisms of my methodology. A full and comprehensive account of the emotional life of fosterage in medieval Ireland lies beyond the scope of this project and is limited by the available sources. Yet, I have attempted to reproduce as full a picture as possible of the emotional community of fosterage as presented in the literary sources. The decisions made about on which texts to study, from what period, and how they have been treated are not infallible and beyond critique.⁷⁸² In this section I wish to address some of the underlying methodological problems with the medieval history of emotions as well as directly explain and defend some of the choices I have made in undertaking this project.

My thesis provides a framework for understanding the emotional community of fosterage in medieval Ireland, yet it cannot be exhaustive. My sources were chosen to reflect the different themes and genres of text in which fosterage appears. These texts can also be read as complementary to one another. Cú Chulainn is a useful figure to focus on as he has many fosterage ties. He is the centre of the multiple fosterage competition, and although his relationship with his foster-brothers is antagonistic, it is a driving force in the *Táin*. The demise of foster-sibling relationships in this text is tragic because it subverts the usual narrative of love and loyalty between foster-brothers. Cú Chulainn is often contrasted with Finn mac Cumail in the secondary literature. I have shown in the first chapter that their differences are not as pronounced as others have claimed. The *ffanaigeacht* material is instructive as it presents a group of

⁷⁸² Susan J. Matt, 'Recovering the Invisible: Methods for the Historical Study of the Emotions', in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. by Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (Chicago, 2014), pp. 41-53.

young people, linked by their shared life and education, who have not ascended into full adulthood. The foster bonds that link them are more fluid, since they are formed without any legal framework. That is not to say that these bonds are any less bonds of fosterage. As this fosterage is undertaken out of affection, and without the exchange of goods, there is less concern for strict accuracy. The overlapping bonds of legal and emotional fosterage were seen in the overlapping foster-fathers of Cú Chulainn.

There are many religious works on which to base the fourth chapter's discussion of fostering the Christ Child. By structuring the chapter around the famous poem, *Ísucán*, I have provided a focus to what is otherwise an unwieldy number of texts. As well as the poem, Íte herself is a central figure of fosterage within a religious context. The saints' lives used later in the chapter, particularly those of Finbarr and Findchú, address the question of fostering children in the monastery in light of the reform movement current at the time, placing the emotional community of fosterage in a wider social context.⁷⁸³ Ailbe forms the focus of chapter five as his life presents us with the clearest description of an animal acting as a fosterer, against which other texts can be compared and contrasted. The animal imagery parallels that use of the *fíán* and the hound nomenclature most obviously reintroduces the character of Cú Chulainn. This overview of some of the decisions made in choosing case studies has been to justify those choices and to outline how they interact with one another in presenting a coherent picture drawn from a wide range of genres and texts.

As regards my engagement with the history of emotions, a number of points need to be addressed. I have, in the Introduction, outlined how my definition of emotional community differs from Rosenwein's. I have outlined the emotional community of fosterage, as it appears throughout medieval Irish literature. Such a community is not a real one, it is a literary artifice and as such one could question its value as an addition to the history of emotions. Yet, any attempt to recreate emotions of the past is troubled, by that anachronism, emotion. As Boquet and Nagy put it 'construire une histoire des émotions; c'est en effet étudier les conceptions et usages du registre affectif dans un

⁷⁸³ *Beatha Bharra*, ed. Ó Riain, p. 33.

corpus en le lisant à l'aune des normes et pratiques d'écriture des sources'.⁷⁸⁴ The literary picture of the emotional community of fosterage allows us to see this affective register in medieval Irish sources. The emotional picture presented in the sources provides the norms and social expectations that surrounded fosterage and that would have been used by contemporaries to understand the affect of fosterage in medieval Ireland.

I am reading the role of the literary emotional community of fosterage as both describing the emotions involved in fosterage and providing a model of those emotions to be enacted by the audience. My approach to the history of emotions is in this case is broadly constructivist; that is to say, how emotions are expressed, even to the self, is conditioned by social expectations, and it is only those expectations that we, as modern scholars looking back at distant texts, can access. It is not self-evident that the emotional life of fosterage should be accurately reflected in these texts. However, the similarities I have pointed out across a range of texts and genres suggest that the image of fosterage is not one that is particular to a single text or author's perspective but one that would reflect the experience of audiences. The emotional lives so described were not purely reflections, they would mediate the way foster families would experience emotion. The effect of literature on emotional lives has been studied in other contexts and time periods.⁷⁸⁵ There are still a number of caveats with using literature as a model for lived emotion. An overwhelmingly positive view of fosterage is promoted by our sources and while I do not doubt that fosterage produced strong, affectionate bonds, the presentation in our texts may have a touch of idealisation about it. The lived emotions are inaccessible but were certainly coloured by the picture of the emotional community of fosterage I have recreated.

There is less focus in my thesis on the language of emotion, on which words are used for 'love' or 'affection', which has been a previous focus of the history of

⁷⁸⁴ Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, 'Une Histoire des Émotions Incarnées', *Médiévales* 61 (2011), 5-24: p. 12.

⁷⁸⁵ Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago, 2001); Jean Starobinski, 'The Idea of Nostalgia', *Diogenes* 54 (1996), 81-103: p. 82.

emotion.⁷⁸⁶ Rather I am concerned with the ways such emotions are acted out and who is enacting these emotions to whom in the texts. The focus is still on the emotions and the bonds created by these emotions, but I need not engage with physiological or philosophical explanations of how emotions arise in the body. Through such studies it has been demonstrated that within the wider European context, the period under discussion is characterised by increased visibility of emotions, in vernacular literature as well as religious devotion.⁷⁸⁷ The lack of first person narratives in my source material, though not without precedent, will inevitably shift the focus onto how emotions are enacted rather than internally felt. Yet, this still allows space to create an emotional picture of fosterage, one that was influenced by and influenced in its turn, the way those emotions were enacted.

The picture of fosterage that emerges is not vastly different from the one that has been assumed in other secondary literature. Yet this overwhelmingly positive view would be difficult to swallow as an accurate reflection of society. We know that familial relationships are complex and marked as much by conflict and pain as by love and support. The conflict that can come from foster-relationships has been well studied in Boll's thesis.⁷⁸⁸ Less open conflict has emerged from the texts I have studied. Rather, when we view the emotional life of the foster-family, we see less openly destructive tensions.: jealousy between foster-siblings; foster-families being allowed to grieve more than natal families; and favouritism. These more nuanced tensions are still played out on a backdrop of a positive representation of fosterage. While families of medieval Ireland may have had their behaviour conditioned by this narrative discourse, we can only be sure that the emotional community of fosterage was presented in this positive light.

⁷⁸⁶ See, for example, Rosenwein's study of "emotion" words in charters, *Generations of Feeling*, pp. 125-29.

⁷⁸⁷ Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, 'Medieval Sciences of Emotions during the Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries: An Intellectual History', *Osiris* 31 (2016), 21-45: p. 45.

⁷⁸⁸ Boll, 'Fosterkin in Conflict'.

My thesis takes texts as its subject. I have recreated the emotional community of fosterage as presented in the literary sources. We can move from this picture to tentative conclusions about historical actors but we cannot be sure of such conclusions. As mentioned in the Introduction, the Stearns have suggested that we distinguish between emotions felt by individuals and emotionology, the collective emotional standards of a society.⁷⁸⁹ In my work, I agree with Reddy's idea that emotional statements are their own distinct speech act, that they 'are influenced directly by, and alter, what they refer to'.⁷⁹⁰ Similarly the emotional community of fosterage presented in the literature is both a reflection of the emotions felt within a foster-family, and a means of altering those emotions. This thesis provides a representation of the emotional community of fosterage, as a societal commonplace; the picture is also one of societal expectations of the emotions felt as part of the fosterage bond. In this way, the picture emerging from the literature would affect how those emotions were enacted within the foster-family. Within the constraints of writing a medieval history of emotions, I have produced a picture of the emotional community of fosterage based on narrative sources.

In this thesis I have examined several different aspects of the emotional life of fosterage in Ireland during the central Middle Ages. Fosterage was such a common facet of medieval Irish life in this period that it occurs throughout the literature. References to foster-families can be found in saga literature, poetry, and religious texts written in both Middle Irish and Latin. Fosterage has been examined in these sources before, but by bringing analysis of all these sources together, I have provided a more comprehensive picture of the emotional community of fosterage. Beyond the legal definitions of fosterage, the bonds could be created through a fosterage of affection, by nurturing and caring for infants and children, without recourse to the law. We have seen how love and tensions lie at the heart of this nutritive and emotional fosterage: how the bond is created through two broad strands education and food; and how

⁷⁸⁹ Stearns and Stearns, 'Emotionology', p. 813.

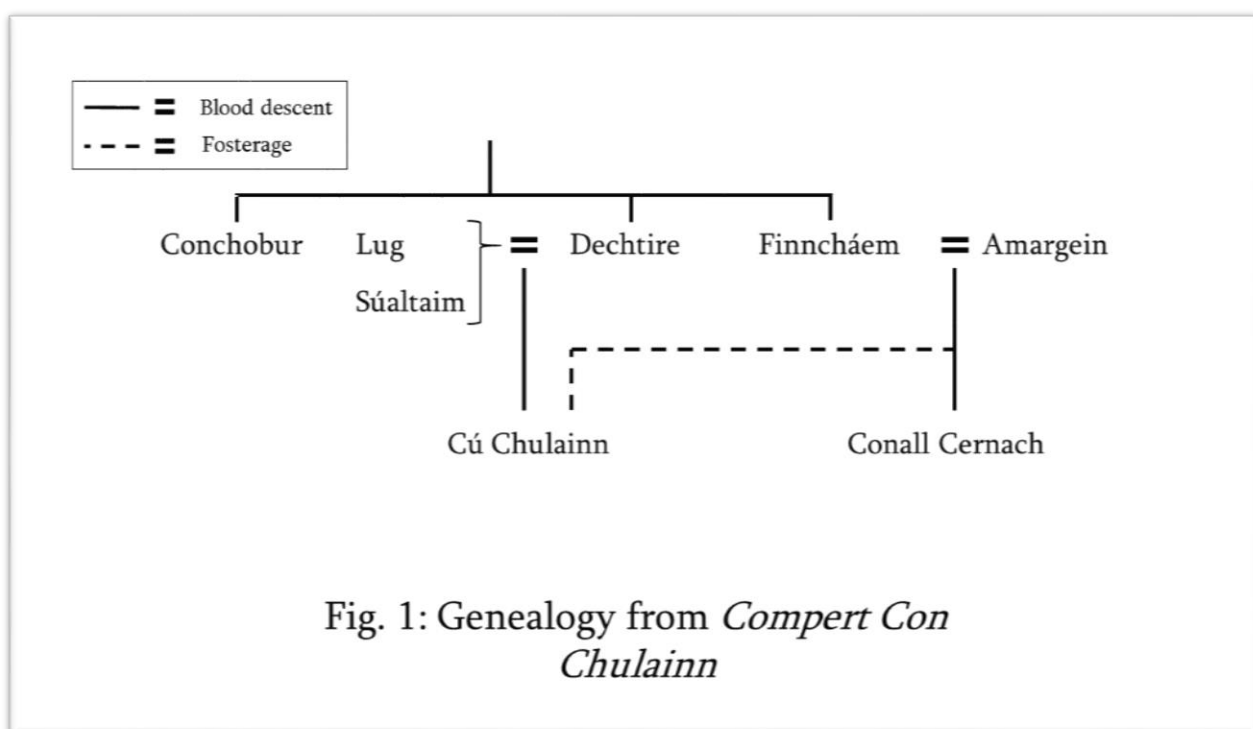
⁷⁹⁰ Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, p. 104.

fosterage language is used with deliberate care to represent all kinds of relationships. I hope this study will provide the basis for further examinations of the role of fosterage in medieval Irish literature.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Genealogies

These genealogies are provided to elucidate the complex blood and fosterage bonds that underpin some of the main texts studied in this thesis. It is against this backdrop that the emotional lives of the foster family play out. Each text presents a picture of the family, whose members may be related differently in a different text



Cú Chulainn has two fathers as he is born of a triple conception in this tale. Lug is his semi-divine parent, while Súltaim is his human father. In some versions of the tale Dechtire is Conchobur's daughter.

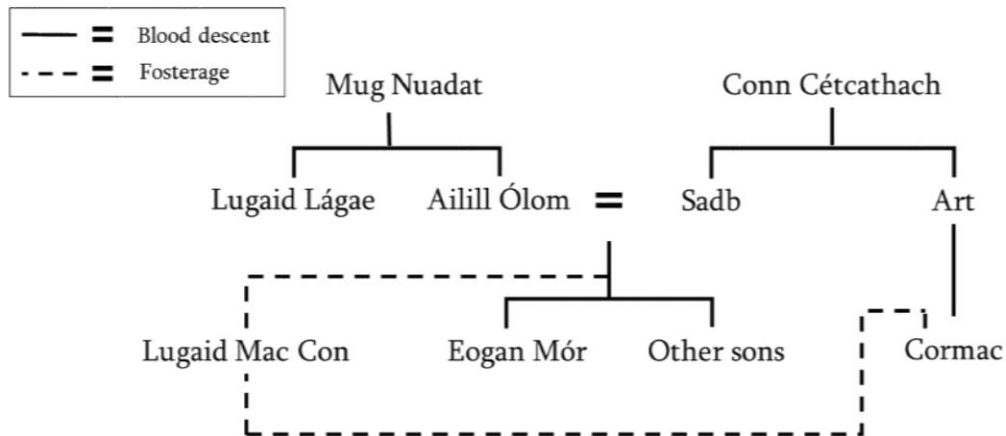


Fig. 2: *Cath Maige Mucrama*

Art fathers Cormac before fighting the battle of Mag Mucrama against Mac Con. Mac Con later takes Cormac as a fosterling. While Cormac is with Mac Con in Tara, he gives the famous judgement that proves Cormac's right to the kingship

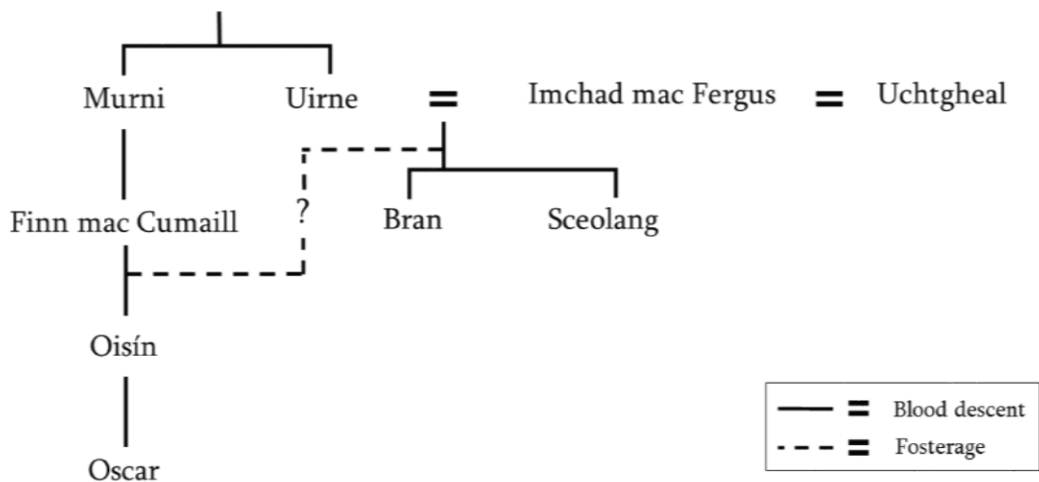


Fig. 3: *Feis Tige Chonain*

As noted in chapter five, Finn takes charge of his cousins, although this is not strictly a foster relationship, as they remain hounds.

Appendix 2: Sources

Here follows a summary, along with approximate dates, and surviving manuscript witness, of some of the heroic narratives investigated in this thesis. These are the main texts studied, not an exhaustive list of all sources used. I have not included the saints' lives as their relative dating and manuscript evidence has been addressed by Sharpe in *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*. The nature of hagiography also makes it resistant to summary, since the plots are comparatively less complex and tracing the connections between all the saints involved lies outside the scope of this appendix.

Acallam na Senórach

The Colloquy of the Ancients

Late Middle Irish/early Early Modern Irish (12th century)

Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Laud 610; Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 487; Chatsworth, Book of Lismore; Dublin, University College, MS Franciscan A 4; Dublin, University College, MS Franciscan A 20(a).

Oisín and Caílte tell St Patrick tales of the *flán* while touring Ireland.

Aided Aínfer Aífe

The Death of Aífe's Only Son

Old Irish (late 9th or 10th century)

Dublin, Trinity College MS 1318; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1336.

Cú Chulainn's son, Connla, who was fathered in Alba comes to Ulster. Since he was told never to give his name to anyone, he gets in a fight with the Ulstermen. His father kills him despite Emer's warnings and as a mark of mourning all calves are separated from their mothers.

Aided Chrimthaind maic Fhidaig ocus trí mac Eochach Muigmedoin

The Tragic Death of Crimthann mac Fidaig and the three sons of Eochaid Muigmedón
Middle Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12

Mongfind betrays her brother, Crimthann, to get her sons, the sons of Eochaid Muigmedón, into the kingship of Ireland. The sons fall to in-fighting and kill each other. Níall Nóigiallach, their half-brother, inherits the kingship.

Aided Guill 7 Gairb

The Tragic Death of Goll and Garb

Late Middle Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster); Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.40

Cú Chulainn is on the shore of Ulster and a giant comes to him in a boat. The giant is Goll son of the king of Germant. Cú Chulainn prevents him from coming ashore and takes his head. Cú Chulainn falls out with the Ulstermen, in his adventures kills Garb, an evil man guarding a glen. A fight nearly breaks out among the Ulstermen but Sencha calms them all down.

Aithbe dam-sa bés mora

The lament of the Caillech Bérrí

Old Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 7; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337 (H 3 18); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1363; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1378.

The poem of lament for a former life and youth spoken by the Caillech (hag or veiled one) of Beare.

Aided Derbforgaill

The Death of Derbforgaill

Early Middle Irish (10th century)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337 (H 3 18).

Derbforgaill arrives in Ulster to sleep with Cú Chulainn, instead he weds her to his foster-son Lugaid. Derbforgaill wins a urination competition against the women of Ulster, but is mutilated by her fellow competitors. She dies of her injuries, Lugaid dies of a broken heart and Cú Chulainn kills the women of Ulster. The tale ends with two lament poems.

Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni

The Great Rout of Mag Muirthemne

Old Irish (a late ninth- or early tenth-century reworking of an eighth-century original)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337 (H 3 18).

The death of Cú Chulainn, planned by the descendants of those he has killed in the *Táin*. The fate is inevitable and ends with Cú Chulainn tied to a standing stone, as in the famous statue in the Dublin Post Office. His foster-brother, Conall Cernach, avenges his death.

Bruiden Da Chocae

Da Choca's Hostel

Middle Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1291; London, British Library, MS Additional 30512 (Leabhar Uí Maolconaire)

After Conchobur dies, the Ulstermen decide who should succeed him. His son in exile, Cormac Conn Longas, is chosen and Cormac begins journeying back. As he does so, he starts breaking his *gessa*, supernatural taboos, and they meet a band of Connacht warriors whom they fight. After holing up in the hostel of Da Choca, Cormac and most people with him are killed.

Buile Shuibne

The Madness of Suibne

Middle Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS B iv 1a; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K 44; Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, 2324-2340.

Suibhne, king of Dal Araidhe, is cursed by St Ronán to go mad in the battle of Mag Rath. In his madness Suibhne transforms into a bird-like creature, reciting poems in the wilderness. He is eventually rehabilitated by St Moling.

Cath Maige Léna

The Battle of Mag Léna

Early Modern Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 L 26; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K 37; Dublin, University College, MS Franciscan A 6; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 10; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS B iv 1a; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K 46; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 L 18; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS C vi 1; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1412.

A later retelling of the events the lead up to and are recounted in *Cath Maige Mucrama*.

Cath Maige Mucrama

The Battle of Mag Mucrama

Late Old Irish/early Middle Irish (ninth century)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster); Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 7.

The reason for conflict between foster-brothers, Eogan and Lugaid Mac Con. They find a fiddler in a yew tree and both claim him. When the decision goes to Eogan, Mac Con goes to war against him. Mac Con loses, flees to Briton, but returns with an army. The battle of Mag Mucrama is fought, with Mac Con and Lugaid Lagae on one side, Eogan and Art mac Guinn on the other. Knowing the battle will go against them Eogan and Art father children before the fight: Eogan fathers Fiacha Muillethan and Art, Cormac. They die in battle and Lugaid takes the kinship of Ireland until Cormac proves him false in judgement. Ailill eventually poisons his former fosterling, Lugaid Mac Con.

Compert Con Chulainn

The Conception of Cú Chulainn

Old Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25; London, British Library, MS Egerton 88; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 N 10; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1363; London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 7; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1287.

The birth of Cú Chulainn. Conchobur seeks his lost daughter or sister Dechtire. After an Otherworldly encounter she is returned to Ulster, eventually giving birth to Cú Chulainn after triple conception. When the Ulstermen arrive at the Otherworldly fort, they are left with a child, who dies. Dechtire has a dream of Lug, from which she gets pregnant; before she is married to Súalataim she terminates the pregnancy and finally becomes pregnant with Setanta/Cú Chulainn. The contest for multiple fosterage concludes the tale.

De maccaib Conaire

Of the sons of Conaire

Middle Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster).

The sons of Conaire Moghaláma take vengeance on the killing of their father. This narrative, later, becomes associated with Conaire Mór and the aftermath of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*.

Dindsenchas

Place name Lore

Late Middle Irish (11th and 12th centuries)

Version A

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster)

Version B

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (The Book of Leinster); Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 506; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.16

Version C

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1295; Dublin, Trinity College MS 1289; Rennes, Bibliothèque de Rennes Métropole, MS 598; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D ii 1 (Book of Uí Maine); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 2 (Book of Lecan); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D ii 2; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS B ii 2; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS B iii 1; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1322; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1317; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 24 P 13; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1436; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1286; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 N 11

A compilation of texts, both prose and verse, on the prominent places of Ireland. The tales usually present an explanatory story of how the place got its name or came to exist in the first place. The relationship between the various recensions of the texts is contested.

Echtra Conaill Gulbain

The Adventures of Conall Gulban

Early Modern Irish

Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, MS 6131-6133; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 20; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 80; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 425; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 131.

How Conall is born and raised. After one of his foster-fathers is killed, he seeks revenge on the Ulstermen and conquers the North of Ireland.

Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedon

The Adventure of the sons of Eochaid Muigmedon

Middle Irish (11th century)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote); Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 390; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 527; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 48a (Liber Flavus Fergusiorum); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 G 4; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS C vi 1; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1412; Dublin Royal Irish Academy, MS 24 B 32.

Níall Noígíallach and his four half-brothers (the sons of Eochaid Muigmedon) encounter the hag Sovereignty and the precedence over the kingship of Ireland is established.

Esnada Tige Buchet

The Songs of Buchet's House

Late Old Irish/early Middle Irish (10th century)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 502; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1319.

Buchet the hospitaller fosters Ethne, the daughter of Cathair Mór, but her brothers make undue demands on his hospitality. He complains to the king Cormac mac Airt, who recompense him, falls in love with Ethne, and marries her.

Feis Tige Becfoltaig

The Feast at the House of Becfoltach

Old Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1287; London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2.

Conchobur and the rest of the nobles of Ulster go to seek Dechtire. At night-fall Fergus seeksto look for shelter and finds a house with Otherworldly residents. Bricriu enters the house before the other men and realises that the young woman there is Dechtire. When Conchobur enters the house, he demands to spend the night with the lady of the house, unaware they are related. Fergus manages to subvert the king's demand and in the morning a boy is found on Conchobur's bosom. The competition to foster the lad ensues.

Feis Tige Chonáin

The Feast of Conán's House

Middle Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1355; Dublin, Trinity College, H 5. 4; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 M 25; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K 7; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12 F 7; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 N 19; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 12 L 39; London, British Library, MS Egerton 106; London, British Library, MS Egerton 145.1; London, British Library, MS Egerton 133; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS E ii 1.

Finn mac Cumail spends the night in the house of Conan, whose father, mother, and brothers Finn has slain. Throughout the evening Conan asks Finn questions and the *ffian* leader replies with a series of tales. At the end of the night Conan tries to kill Finn and the *ffian* with much death and destruction.

Fingal Rónáin

The Kin-Slaying of Ronan

Late ninth or early 10th century

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337

Rónán, the old king of Leinster, desires a new wife and take the young daughter of Eochaid to wife. She falls in love with his son, Máel Fothartaig, who spurns all her advances. The tale culminates in the daughter of Eochaid, proving, to Rónán's satisfaction, her slander, that Máel Fothartaih raped her, with a verse capping

challenge. Máel Fothartaig's foster-brothers revenge him on Rónán and his wife's family.

Fled Bricrenn

Bricriu's Feast

Late ninth century

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); London, British Library, MS Egerton 93; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.40; Leiden, University Library, MS Vossianus lat. qu. 7; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1336 5; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337 19

Bricriu, the mischief-maker of the Ulad, causes a competition to arise among the great heroes of Ulster: Lóegaire Búadach, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn. In each trial Cú Chulainn emerges the victor but the others find a way to disqualify the test, until Cú Roí forces them to undergo a Green Knight-esque test of mutual beheadings. Cú Chulainn emerges the ultimate victor.

Fotha Catha Cnucha

The Reason for the Battle of Cnucha

Middle Irish (11th century)

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 16

Tale of the conception and birth of Finn mac Cumhaill, how his father died and how he was raised by female *flán* in the wilderness.

Geneamuin Chormaic

The Birth of Cormac

Middle Irish (c. 1250)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote)

The conception and birth of Cormac mac Airt and the tale of his rise to power after pronouncing a true-judgement in the face of king Lugiad Mac Con's false one.

Immram curaig Máile Dúin

The Voyage of Máel Dúin's curach

Middle Irish

London, British Library, MS Harleian 5280; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 10 (Yellow Book of Lecan); London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre)

Máel Dúin is conceived by a nun who was sexually assaulted. He is raised by a queen until he comes to question his identity. He goes to find this father, who is already dead. On learning of his death Máel Dúin journeys in a curach, seeing fantastical islands on his way.

Immram curaig Ua Corra

The Voyage of the curach of the Uí Chorra

Middle Irish (11th century)

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 29 (Book of Fermoy); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 M 50.

The three sons of Connall, one of the Uí Chorra, were born with the assistance of the devil. One day they go to kill their grandfather, as they have been remiss in their evil deeds, but the old man converts them to Christianity. As a penitence they rebuild the churches they destroyed and go on pilgrimage over the sea.

Longes mac nUislenn

The Exile of the sons of Uisliu

Old Irish (9th century)

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 16 (Yellow Book of Lecan); London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1287; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 138

Derdriu is prophesied to be the most beautiful woman in Ireland but to also bring destruction to Ulster. Conchobur has her raised apart so that when she comes of age, she can marry him. Before that comes to pass, she falls in love with Noísiu, one of the three sons of Uisliu. Noísiu, Derdriu, and his brothers flee to Scotland but are tempted back by promise of the protection of powerful noblemen, including Fergus mac Roich. However, they are betrayed; Fergus and the others pledged to protect the sons of Uisliu, rampage at the betrayal and leave for Connacht; after many years Derdriu kills herself.

Macgnímartha Finn

The Boyhood Deeds of Finn

Late Middle Irish (12th century)

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 610

The youthful exploits of Finn mac Cumail, including besting a group of boys, *macrad*, in ball games and getting the name Finn, for accidentally eating the salmon of knowledge.

Oileamhain Con Culainn

Cú Chulainn's Training

Early Modern Irish

London, British Library, MS Egerton 106; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K 37; Stowe XXIV; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 C 22; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 M 47; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 G 21; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 M 43; London, British Library, MS Egerton 145; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 D 29; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 B 21; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 22 E 3.

This tells of Cú Chulainn's training with Scáthach in some detail, also foreshadowing Fer Diad's rivalry with him. The trials of the training are enlarged upon and the war with Aífe downplayed. The setting has been moved to Scythia, rather than Alba.

Orcuin Néill Noígiallaig

The Slaying of Níall Noígiallaig

Later than 9th century

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 502; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 P 12 (Book of Ballymote); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS Stowe C i 2; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Supplement to the Book of Leinster); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K 32; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS C iv 3.

A composite tale telling of the death of Níall Noígiallach. After Níall banishes Echu, Echu conspires to kill Níall with a single cast when Níall is showing his fine form to the women of Muir nIcht. Níall's foster-family mourns his loss and

Scéla Éogain agus Cormaic

The Tidings of Éogan and Cormac

Possibly derived from common Old Irish text, but could be Middle Irish reworking
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 610; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1336

The tale of Eogan and Art mac Conn before the battle of Mucrama. They father two miraculous children before going into the doomed fight: Fiacha Mullethan and Cormac mac Art. Cormac is fostered by Mac Con, who was victorious in the battle of Mucrama. Cormac gives a better judgment than him and accedes to the throne of Ireland.

Scél asa mberar co mbad hé Find mac Cumaill Mongán agus aní dia fil aided Fothaid Airgdech

A story from which it was inferred that Mongán was Find mac Cumaill, and the cause of the death of Fothad Airgdech

Old Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 N 10; London, British Library, MS Egerton 88; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1363

Mongán is challenged to recite some lost lore about Finn. When he answers correctly, and his stories are corroborated by the appearance of Caílte, it is assumed that he is, in fact, Finn mac Cumaill.

Serlige Con Culainn

The Wasting-Sickness of Cú Chulainn

Old Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1363

Cú Chulainn is laid low by Otherworldly women, who are trying to get him to come to the Otherworld to fight for them. Cú Chulainn first sends Lóeg, his charioteer, who reports things are as the Otherworldly women say. Cú Chulainn goes, fights, and has a sexual encounter with the women, the cause of Emer's only jealousy. The text includes *Bríathartheosc Con Culainn*, a wisdom text, told by Cú Chulainn to his fosterling Lugaid Réoderg.

Táin Bó Cúailnge

The Cattle Raid of Cooley

Recension I, Old Irish; Recension II, Middle Irish; Recension III, Early Modern Irish
Recension I

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Maynooth, Russell Library, MS 3 a 1

Recension II

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS C vi 3

Recension III

London, British Library, MS Egerton 93, Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1319

Medb, Ailill and the rest of Ireland, unite to take the Donn Cúailnge, the great brown bull from the Ulstermen. While the rest of the province is struck down with a wasting sickness (making them as weak as a woman in childbirth), the young Cú Chulainn stands alone on the border. As the army advances the Ulster exiles tell stories of Cú Chulainn's youth, the *Macgnímrada Con Culainn* – Cú Chulainn's Boyhood Deeds. Cú Chulainn slows the advancing army down by challenging them to single combats. Most of these are fought with his foster-brothers, including the climactic, *Comrac Fir Diad* – The Encounter with Fer Diad. After this hard fight some of the Ulstermen recover and the invading army is met in a big battle. Medb eventually steals the Donn Cúailnge and the bull dies fighting Ailill's bull, Finnbennach.

Táin Bó Froích

Fráech's Cattle Raid

Old Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.40; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1287

Fráech comes to Connacht to woo Finnabair, the daughter of Ailill and Medb. The bride-price Ailill demands is very heavy and he even attempts to kill Fráech. Fráech eventually wins the maiden, but while he has been away his cattle are stolen from him. He journeys with Conall Cernach to the Alps to get them back.

Tairired na nDéssi

The Migration of the Déisi (also known as *Tucair innarba na nDessi i mMumain* 'The cause of the expulsion of the Déssi into Munster')

Recension A is Old Irish. Recension B just predates 1106.

Recension A

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 502; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 610; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D ii 1; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 48

Recension B

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1316; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1336

Explains the reason for the expulsion of the people known as the Déssi from Tara, their subsequent wanderings, adventures, and fights, before settling in Leinster.

Tochmarc Emire

The Wooing of Emer

Early version and later Middle Irish version

Early version

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512

Later version

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); London, British Library, MS Harleian 5280; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 N 10; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 29 (Book of Fermoy); London, British Library, MS Egerton 92; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster)

Cú Chulainn is forced by the Ulad to marry. He seeks out Emer, the daughter of Forgall Manach. After a riddling exchange she agrees to marry him, but her father imposes some onerous restrictions. Cú Chulainn has to learn to be the best warrior in Europe. He sets out with some companions to learn from Domnall. Once their learning is complete Cú Chulainn sets out alone to Alba. There he learns from Scáthach, helps her defeat her rival warrior-woman Aífe, fathers a child on Aífe, and returns home to Ulster. After rescuing Emer from a fortress, they marry.

Tochmarc Étaíne

The Wooing of Étaín

Middle Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 16 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 4; London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337

Essentially three tales. The first tells how Midir raises Óengus In Mac Óg. Óengus helps Midir woo his love Étaín. The second tale is of Étaín's death and rebirth into a number of forms, until, as worm she is swallowed by the wife of Étar. After that she is born again as a woman. The final tale tells of Midir's wooing of Étaín, who has remarried since growing up again.

Togail Bruidne Da Derga

The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel

Old/Middle Irish

First recension

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 N 10; London, British Library, MS Egerton 88; Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS G 7; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre)

Second recension

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318 (Yellow Book of Lecan); Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS D iv 2; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 25 (Lebor na hUidre); London, British Library, MS Additional 33993; London, British Library, MS Egerton 92; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 29 (Book of Fermoy); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1319; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337

Third recension

London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1288

The tale of Conaire's birth, his fosterage, how he fulfilled a prophesy to become king of Tara. After a successful few years, his foster-brothers start raiding, like their father and grandfather before them. Conaire punishes the raiders, but spares his foster-brothers. This begins a series of Conaire breaking his *gessa*. The exiled foster-brothers get Incgél, a Briton, on their side. They return to Ireland, and raid the hostel of Da Derga, where Conaire is staying. Conaire is killed in the encounter along with many other heroes on both sides.

Togail na Tebe

The Destruction of Thebes

Middle Irish

Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS 72.1.8; London, British Library, MS Egerton 1781; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1298

An Irish retelling of Statius's *Thebaid*

Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghrainne

The Elopement of Diarmait and Grainne

Early Modern Irish

Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 24 P 9; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 L 27

Finn holds a feast to celebrate his impending marriage to Gráinne. During the feast, she falls in love with younger Diarmait. The pair elope and are pursued by Finn and the *fián* over Ireland, alternately aided by Diarmait's foster-father and the other members of the *fián*. Eventually the old Finn has his revenge and kills Diarmait and Gráinne.

Tromdámh Guaire

The Heavy-hosting of Guaire

Late Middle Irish or Early Modern Irish

Chatsworth (Derbyshire), Book of Lismore; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 H 6; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 24 M 31; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 16; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 34; London, British Library, MS Additional 18748; London, British Library, MS Egerton 134; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 O 40; Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 E 11

Senchán Torpéist becomes chief poet of Ireland and goes on a circuit. When he stays at Guaire's fort he makes excessive demands of the king's hospitality. The king submits to these demands because he fears being satirised by the assembled poets. Guaire is eventually freed of this heavy hosting by his brother, Marbán, who asks the poets questions they cannot answer. The last question is to recite *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. When none of the poets can do it, the story about the finding of the *Táin* is begun.

Tuarasgabhail Chatha Gabhra

The Account of the Battle of Gabra

Middle Irish

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1339 (Book of Leinster)

An account of the battle of Gabra, fought by the *fián*, related by Oisín to Patrick.

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